DESTINY AND ENDEAVOUR

NIYATI AA PURUSHAARTH

Original Maithili Short Story collection authored

by

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

DESTINY AND ENDEAVOUR

Translated into English

by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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A Maithili Story Collection Exploring Childhood, Moral Inquiry, Destiny, and Human Endeavour

Jagdish Prasad Mandal

Translated into English from the original Maithili
by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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Translated from the Maithili short story collection 'NIYATI AA PURUSHAARTH'
Authored by Jagdish Prasad Mandal
Translated into English by Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

Destiny and Endeavour is the literary English translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili story collection Niyati aa Purushaarth. Though centered on children, the book is deeply enriched with philosophical insight, presenting a thoughtful dialogue between childhood curiosity and life's profound questions. Through the affectionate relationship between Gopal Babu, a devoted schoolteacher, and his inquisitive pupils, Munilal and Dhunilal, the stories explore themes of sorrow and joy, knowledge and conduct, faith and superstition, love and responsibility, and destiny and human endeavour. Rooted in the rural landscape of Mithila, the narratives transform classrooms, village paths, courtyards, family relationships, and everyday conversations into vibrant spaces of learning and reflection.

Mandal's artistry lies in his ability to transform simple questions into profound reflections. Rather than portraying children as passive listeners, he allows their doubts, wonder, and innocence to become the foundation of wisdom and understanding. This translation seeks to preserve the emotional warmth, cultural richness, and contemplative rhythm of the original Maithili text.

Destiny and Endeavour is therefore not merely a collection of children's stories, but also a gentle guide to ethical living, self-awareness, and purposeful action.

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Dedication

Dedicated to young minds who question, wonder, learn, and grow; to teachers who transform curiosity into wisdom; and to every reader who believes that while destiny may shape our circumstances, the meaning of life is forged through knowledge, character, and human endeavour.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Preface

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For several years, I have felt that the literature of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandalji deserves to travel beyond the boundaries of Maithili readership and reach a wider community of thoughtful readers. Rooted in the soil of Mithila, his writings nevertheless transcend the limits of region, language, and community. They speak of life in both its simplicity and depth, of suffering and joy, struggle and hope, human weakness and human possibility. It is with this conviction that I undertook the English translation of his Maithili short story collection Niyati aa Purushaarth, now presented to readers as **Destiny and Endeavour**.

At one level, this book may be read as a child-centred collection of stories. Yet to describe it merely as a children's book would be to narrow its scope. Its outer form is simple, but its inner movement is reflective, moral, and philosophical. The collection unfolds through the affectionate and intellectually alert relationship between Gopal Babu, a dedicated and thoughtful teacher, and his two inquisitive pupils, Munilal and Dhunilal. Their questions are simple, but never superficial. They emerge from the classroom, from daily life, from curiosity, doubt, and the natural restlessness of young minds. Through these questions, Mandalji

opens a wider field of reflection: What are happiness and sorrow? What is life? What is the purpose of life? How should one understand superstition, affection, social conduct, human effort, destiny, and moral responsibility? These are not merely subjects for instruction; they become living questions shaped through dialogue, experience, and inward reflection.

One of the distinctive strengths of this collection lies in the way Mandalji refuses to treat children as passive listeners. He recognises in them the earliest stirrings of thought and allows their innocence to become a path toward wisdom. Gopal Babu, too, is not simply a teacher who delivers lessons. He is a guide who listens, observes, waits, and responds with affection and patience. In him, the role of the teacher acquires a deeper significance. Teaching becomes not a mechanical profession, but a moral responsibility. The classroom expands into life, and life itself becomes the true school.

The ten stories in this collection are not isolated pieces placed side by side. Together, they form a gradual journey of thought. The movement begins with emotional experience, passes through moral understanding, enters social and philosophical inquiry, and finally arrives at the relationship between destiny and human endeavour. This gradual unfolding gives the collection its unity. The reader senses that each story prepares the ground for the next, and that every question leads the mind toward a deeper level of awareness.

The opening story, Happiness and Sorrow, establishes the emotional and intellectual foundation of

the book. A poetic line describing the world as touched by both sorrow and happiness unsettles the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal, transforming an ordinary lesson into a serious inquiry. Here, Mandalji reveals the true nature of childhood curiosity: children do not merely hear words; they seek to understand them. The second story, Sorrow and Happiness, deepens this inquiry. After a period of reflection, the boys return to Gopal Babu because the question has continued to grow within them. The discussion now connects human emotion with conduct, action, and moral responsibility. Happiness and sorrow are not presented merely as experiences that descend upon human beings; they are also shaped by one's awareness, behaviour, and moral choices.

In What Is Life, and What Is the Purpose of Life?, the dialogue moves from emotional experience to the larger mystery of existence. Gopal Babu explains that life becomes a blessing for those who understand it, but a burden for those who fail to grasp its meaning. His formulation of knowledge, vision, and character gives the story a complete moral framework. Knowledge is not sufficient by itself. Vision must give it direction, and character must transform it into conduct. Through this simple but powerful idea, Mandalji teaches young readers that the purpose of life is not merely survival, success, or comfort. It lies in the harmonious development of thought, feeling, action, and resolve.

The collection then enters the world of social belief and critical awareness. In Superstition, Mandalji handles a delicate subject with remarkable balance. He neither dismisses inherited belief casually nor accepts blind practice without question. Through the boys' curiosity

about rural practices such as ritual healing, exorcism, folk belief, and explanations of suffering, Mandalji opens a serious discussion on knowledge and discernment. Gopal Babu's response teaches that belief must be examined through experience, reason, and moral intelligence. Here, true education does not merely provide information; it gives one the courage to distinguish faith from unexamined acceptance.

In Contentious People, a small school-related situation opens into a wider reflection on society, caste, labour, and spiritual greatness. The reference to Sant Raidas quietly challenges caste prejudice and affirms the dignity of labour. A cobbler by caste and a worker by livelihood becomes, in the moral imagination of the story, a saint by inner realisation. Mandalji thus places before young readers a deeply democratic idea of greatness. True worth does not arise from birth, wealth, or social status. It arises from self-knowledge, work, humility, contentment, and moral depth.

The sixth story, New Life, marks a significant turn in the collection. The celebration of Sant Raidas Jayanti does not remain a formal public event. It becomes a moment of renewal for the village, for the pupils, and for Gopal Babu himself. The story shows that public life, when guided by sincerity, can awaken new confidence in individuals and communities. Gopal Babu's reflection after the programme, along with his conversation with his wife, Sushila, adds a tender domestic dimension to the story. Public honour, personal humility, family affection, and social awakening come together naturally. In this story, education begins to move from questioning and explanation toward transformation.

Affection, the seventh story, turns the inquiry toward the delicate discipline of human relationships. Through the presence of Vimal Babu, the narrative moves beyond the teacher-pupil relationship and enters the wider world of adult companionship, professional difference, misunderstanding, and social distance. Gopal Babu makes an important distinction: forming affection may be easier, but sustaining it is far more difficult. Love, friendship, and human closeness must be preserved through humility, continuity, trust, and moral alertness. Mandalji presents affection not as a passing emotion, but as a responsibility of conduct.

In Human Endeavour, the central idea of purposeful action comes into sharper focus. A simple school situation, where attendance is low and work seems impossible, becomes the starting point for a serious discussion on duty, self-discipline, rights, and responsibility. Gopal Babu reminds Vimal Babu that no person is merely another's master or servant. In a deeper sense, each human being must become both master and servant of himself. Human endeavour, therefore, is not merely physical effort. It is the strength through which a person builds life through resolve, corrects flawed vision, accepts responsibility, and moves from helplessness toward purposeful self-creation.

The ninth story, The Mind Hung Suspended, turns inward. Vimal Babu's mind becomes restless after his conversation with Gopal Babu. He can no longer return easily to routine comfort. His mind hangs between habit and inquiry, between inherited assumptions and newly awakened reflection. The question that disturbs him is significant: why is science often placed in opposition to religion? Gopal Babu's response is brief, but it opens a

vast field of thought. Science is truth, and religion, too, in its true form, is truth. Mandalji does not reduce this question to an easy conclusion. Rather, he shows that true education often begins when the mind becomes unsettled enough to seek a deeper harmony between knowledge, belief, action, and truth.

The final story, Destiny and Endeavour, gathers the philosophical threads of the entire collection. By this stage, Gopal Babu, Vimal Babu, Munilal, and Dhunilal have formed a small but meaningful intellectual family. Their conversations are no longer merely instructional; they have become a shared search for understanding. The discussion now moves toward the history of ideas. Gopal Babu explains that fatalism and the doctrine of human endeavour have flowed through society since ancient times. He refers to the Vedic age, to Buddha and Mahavir as thinkers and practitioners of effort, to Goshalak of the Ajivika tradition as a fatalist, and even to modern psychological debates. The story does not present destiny and endeavour as dry abstractions. It places them within society, history, self-knowledge, and human transformation. The concluding message is clear: human beings should not merely wait for what is believed to be written in destiny. Life advances through awareness of one's inner strength, discrimination, resolve, and moral will.

To understand the inner strength of this book, one must also understand the intellectual ground from which Mandalji's literature emerged. His personality and creative work cannot be separated from each other. His literature is born from lived experience, and his life itself stands before us like a living document of rural Mithila, agrarian culture, labour, social struggle, folk

consciousness, and ethical values. He is not merely a writer of stories, novels, plays, poems, and essays. He is a people-centred literary figure whose creative vision is deeply connected with fields and threshing grounds, village homes, family relations, caste realities, farmers' pain, workers' struggles, social injustice, and the dignity of human life.

Mandalji's early life, marked by struggle and responsibility, gave him a rare closeness to the realities of ordinary people. The loss of his father in childhood, the burdens of family life, his involvement with farming, and his direct experience of rural society shaped in him a strong sense of self-reliance, labour, and social awareness. For this reason, nature in his writing is never mere decoration. Water, sunlight, clouds, floods, trees, crops, land, and the labour of farmers appear as part of the living structure of existence. His literature does not arise from distant imagination; it arises from life observed, endured, and understood from within.

Another important aspect of Mandalji's intellectual personality is his social commitment. Feudal behaviour, caste narrowness, sharecropping, distorted forms of social movements, electoral manipulation, and the suffering of deprived communities have all contributed to the formation of his literary consciousness. He has not looked at society from a safe distance. He has lived among its problems, felt their intensity, understood their inner forms, and searched for humane directions within them. This is why his social vision is not abstract; it is grounded in experience. His writing does not depend on sermons or idealism alone; it carries the weight of lived truth.

This social rootedness gives special depth to Niyati aa Purushaarth. Although the book speaks through children, it is not detached from society. The questions it raises belong to ordinary life, but they open toward larger social and moral realities. Happiness and sorrow are related to action. Life is related to purpose. Superstition is related to knowledge. Affection is related to responsibility. Labour is related to dignity. Destiny is related to endeavour. Through these connections, Mandalji quietly teaches that a human being cannot live meaningfully without thought, conduct, self-discipline, and social awareness.

Mandalji has often emphasised that a writer should keep one eye on society and the other on pen and paper. This statement may be taken as a key to his literary method. For him, literature is not an intellectual game cut off from society. It is a way of understanding the condition, struggles, and possibilities of human beings within society. In Niyati aa Purushaarth, this vision appears in a tender yet serious form. The book addresses young readers, but its philosophical range belongs to all ages. Through children's questions, Mandalji discusses the discipline of thought, the importance of questioning, the relationship between belief and reason, the dignity of effort, and the difficult relationship between destiny and human action.

The title itself carries the central tension of the book. Destiny places circumstances before human beings, but endeavour gives direction to life. Mandalji neither rejects destiny with impatience nor surrenders to it blindly. He places destiny and endeavour in conversation. He asks readers to think, question, act, and understand that human life is shaped not merely by

what is given, but also by what is pursued through knowledge, character, discipline, and moral effort. Destiny may create conditions, but endeavour creates meaning. Destiny may place limits, but endeavour discovers possibilities within and beyond those limits. This balanced vision gives the book its philosophical maturity.

The educational value of this book deserves special notice. In an age when education is often reduced to information, examination, and competition, Mandalji restores the moral and reflective meaning of learning. He shows that a good teacher does not merely provide answers; he protects the courage to ask questions. A true pupil does not merely memorise lessons; he allows thought to disturb, deepen, and transform him. In this sense, Gopal Babu, Munilal, Dhunilal, and later Vimal Babu form a small but meaningful intellectual community. Their conversations remind us that education begins in curiosity, grows through dialogue, and matures into wisdom.

Translating this book into English has been both a literary and cultural responsibility. Maithili carries within it a particular warmth of speech, a rhythm of rural life, a tenderness of address, and a natural closeness to folk experience. Mandalji's prose often moves through familiar images, idioms, village situations, moral reflections, and philosophical turns of thought. My effort has been to retain, as far as possible, the emotional warmth, cultural texture, and reflective simplicity of the original. A translation cannot reproduce every shade of the source language, but it can try to carry its inner pulse. That has been my humble aim.

Destiny and Endeavour may be read as a children's book, but it should not be limited to that category alone. It is equally a book for teachers, parents, students, and all readers who believe that life becomes meaningful through awareness, affection, self-discipline, and purposeful action. It reminds us that the mind of a child is not empty; it is full of wonder. It also reminds us that the responsibility of elders is not only to instruct the young, but also to guide their questions toward truth, sensitivity, and moral courage.

I hope this translation will introduce English readers to a significant voice of contemporary Maithili literature and help them enter the thoughtful, humane, and socially rooted world of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandalji. If these stories encourage even a few readers to reflect upon life, duty, affection, knowledge, destiny, and human endeavour with greater seriousness, the purpose of this translation will be fulfilled.

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Happiness and Sorrow

☰

Munilal and Dhunilal are pupils in the same class at the same high school in the same village. There is, however, an age difference of about a year between them, even though they study in the same standard. One may ask why such a difference exists. There could be many reasons, but in their case, the main reason is economic condition. We know well that those living under financial strain often fall behind in access to life's opportunities, while those who are more comfortably placed move ahead more easily. Neither you nor I would accept this as an absolute rule, for it also happens that, here and there, someone breaks through such boundaries like the embankment of the Kosi and lets his own current flow.

Let us set aside, for the moment, who does what. For now, it is enough to say that despite the one-year age difference, Munilal and Dhunilal study in the ninth class of the same high school.

It is spring. Phagun (March) is nearing its end, and the first warmth of Chait (April) has begun to arrive. By chance, Munilal and Dhunilal are seated together on a bench in the third row of the classroom. The third period is Hindi.

Gopal Babu is, of course, a well-known Hindi teacher. On Teachers' Day, that is, the fifth of September, celebrated in the name of Dr Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, who became the second President of independent India after Rajendra Babu, Gopal Babu had been honoured as a good teacher. There was, naturally, a considerable difference between the first and second Presidents: Rajendra Babu had risen from the legal profession to the Presidency, while Radhakrishnan had risen from teaching, from the position of a professor, to the Presidency.

Since Gopal Babu had been honoured on that occasion, he was regarded as a certified teacher not only in the eyes of the students but also in the eyes of fellow teachers and society. Nor was that all. Gopal Babu also looked at himself through his own eyes. After receiving the honour, he gave up several of his shortcomings, embraced good qualities, and continued trying to hold on to them. In this way, Gopal Babu had begun shaping himself into a teacher who was never careless about his duty.

In the Hindi class, that is, in the class devoted to the Hindi subject, a question arises: should Hindi be regarded as a subject or as literature? In rough student language, all pupils call it "the Hindi subject." Whether physics or chemistry, geography or economics, business methods or accounts, all subjects are written in the Hindi language. So let us set aside the matter of language and subject. Gopal Babu is a teacher of Hindi language and literature.

Being a teacher alert to his duty, Gopal Babu kept turning his head again and again towards the next

classroom even before the bell rang. The moment the room became free, that is, as soon as the teacher of the previous period left, he himself would enter for the next class. There was another point as well. Had he also been assigned a class in the second period, the situation might have been different, but that was not the case here. Since Gopal Babu was a teacher who never neglected his duty, he had made it a habit to attend to his responsibilities the moment he entered the classroom and to complete his work ahead of time.

Another question arises here: should a task be completed exactly on time, or before time? Such a thought cannot be dismissed altogether. Yet one thing may certainly be said: by bringing oneself to a pace faster than the pace of time, the same work can be brought under control before time itself demands it. Whatever may be said- Gopal Babu possessed such eagerness of mind that, wherever his own work was concerned, falling short was unacceptable from any point of view. Therefore, he considered it proper always to keep himself prepared in accordance with that responsibility.

The pupils of the class were, after all, pupils. At times, even after a lesson had begun, and sometimes even before it started, they would slip into mischief. But here it was not so. Since it was Gopal Babu's class, all the pupils had already made themselves alert and sat in a state of curiosity. Just as the hungry chicks of a bird keep raising their eyes towards the path of their mother in expectation of food, so too were the pupils about to lift their eyes in search of Gopal Babu when he entered the classroom with a book in his hand.

Unlike in a college, attendance is not marked period by period in a high school, so there was no such task for Gopal Babu to perform. Entering the class, he went straight to a line from Pant Ji's poem-

"The world is afflicted by excessive sorrow;

the world is afflicted by excessive happiness."

Here, the word afflicted may sound somewhat harsh, but let that be for now. For the moment, it is enough to say that this world is afflicted both by sorrow and by happiness.

Among the pupils seated in the full classroom, the feeling of the subject was awakened. How could the same world be afflicted by both? The question was certainly there.

Dhunilal had a child's mind, just as Munilal did. Yet while the teacher was teaching, it would not have been proper to stand up in the middle of the class and say anything. Whatever effect this may or may not have had on the other students, it sent the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal flying into the sky. As a result, though their ears remained alert, neither of them heard or understood the next lines of the poem or the explanation that followed.

The question was not an easy one. If the world is afflicted by sorrow, how can it also be afflicted by happiness? And if it is afflicted by happiness, how can it be afflicted by sorrow?

Their condition became like that of an empty railway carriage which, after being attached to the engine, passes through the station while the passengers meant to board it are left behind on the way. In other words, just as an urgent task weighs heavily on the head of a restless man, so it happened with Munilal and

Dhunilal. Of course, the restlessness in the minds of the two boys was their own in each case. What form it had in one, the other could not understand. Munilal could not understand Dhunilal's inner state, nor could Dhunilal understand Munilal's. And how could they? Seven billion people have seven billion forms of intelligence, judgement and mind. It is known that in the course of a day, the mind wanders more than sixty thousand times. How, then, could it allow thought and judgement to remain fixed in one place forever? That would mean that intelligence itself had seized the mind firmly and held it still, not allowing it to move in any direction.

Whatever the truth may be, when the class ended, Munilal said to Dhunilal-

"Dhuni, I want to meet Gopal Babu for a moment."

When someone snatches the very words from another person's mouth and says the same thing himself, people say that he has stood at the very boundary of the other's mind, that he has taken the words hidden in his stomach and brought them out through his own mouth. Agreeing at once, Dhunilal said-

"I too want to meet him."

Even so, the two boys did not cut their wings like Jatayu (a noble vulture in the Ramayan) in trying to seize the sun. Both Munilal and Dhunilal set off behind Gopal Babu as soon as the class was over in order to meet him. After walking some distance, between the classroom and the staff room, the two boys quickened their steps and reached Gopal Babu. As soon as they arrived, Munilal said-

"Sir, there is something we need to ask."

Gopal Babu was silently reciting the lesson for his

next class in his mind as though it were the Gayatri mantra. He now had a period with the tenth class and was thinking about what he had to teach that day. Meanwhile, hearing Munilal's words, he turned back, looked at him, and said-

"I am busy with work just now, so not now. Meet me after the school is over."

Just as, even when a task is not done immediately, the assurance that it will be done awakens confidence in the mind, so it happened with both boys, Munilal and Dhunilal. Turning back and returning towards their own classroom, the two began to think. Munilal said-

"Dhuni bhai, perhaps it has turned out well."

But Dhunilal's heart felt almost broken. After all, dismissal is dismissal. Just as it can put an end to work, and through that even bring a kind of end to life, so too, within the endless forms of life, it can sometimes improve work itself. Dhunilal felt disheartened for this reason: just as a man suffering from unbearable thirst feels immense satisfaction on receiving water, so too, when water is not found, immense dissatisfaction arises. That was what happened to Dhunilal.

On the other hand, Gopal Babu's mind, inwardly delighted, was taking on a fresh greenness of joy and shaping its own sense of honour. It was forming itself as the sacred thread is knotted before being worn, or as though a new flower or fruit had suddenly been discovered in some boundless forest in immeasurable abundance. Suddenly, before Gopal Babu's eyes, something began to flicker like a firefly standing on the border between darkness and light.

As soon as the class ended, Gopal Babu came out

of the office room and began searching for Munilal and Dhunilal among the four hundred students. Just as a lover searches eagerly for the beloved, so single-minded that even among billions of people his attention follows only that one figure, Gopal Babu searched for the two boys in the same way. On their side, Munilal and Dhunilal too were searching for him, eager to meet him.

The moment the eyes of all three met, Gopal Babu began moving forward, and Munilal and Dhunilal also advanced towards him and came near. When he raised his eyes and looked at the two boys, it seemed to him that their minds were trembling with immense thirst. Descending from the sky to the earth like rainwater, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, just as hunger and thirst have come to you, they have come to me as well. So the three of us shall go together to my quarters. There we shall first eat something and have tea. After that, we shall talk."

Both physical and mental satisfaction came to the two boys at once. In one voice, they said-

"Very good."

On reaching his quarters, Gopal Babu seated the two boys, Munilal and Dhunilal, on the cot in the veranda by the doorway. He himself went to the hand pump to cleanse and refresh himself, that is, to restore energy to his tired body and to the mind within that body. Yet his mind was still watching the actions of the two students. Were the boys treating the place as their own home and attending to some necessary task, or were they looking entirely towards him?

After all, the world is the world. Everyone knows that while crossing a current, people say, "Open the

current, cross to the other bank, such is the nature of this river." On the other hand, it is also said-

"If one finds a guru even by offering one's head, one should still consider it cheap." Now think of it this way: in the month of Aghan (December), one brings the ripe heads of paddy from the field, arranges them properly in a small sheaf, and offers them to Mahadev Baba at the Makar fair.

In a well-ordered family, if the members understand the rules of the household and shape their family life accordingly, then the running of that family certainly moves forward in a proper manner. Gopal Babu's wife was, one may say, endowed with the qualities of a Maithil woman and equally familiar with the customs and practices of Mithila. Now you may ask: custom is custom, so what has Mithila to do with it? Call it Bhojpuri bari (seed) or the bari of Allahpur, bari is bari.

You may call it bari in your own mind, and no one will bind you hand and foot for that. But this much will certainly be said: the seed-form from which the plant of bari is born, what in Hindi is called beej and in Maithili beea or beehen, is also called bichchair or bichchain from Allahpur to Dharampur. Let everyone make his own language into his own speech. Mithila is the birthplace of bari. Here grows the lotus flower, and by lotus one should not understand the land lotus, but the lotus that blooms in water, the tip of whose root is called bisandh and which is also food for the poor. Upon that very plant grows bari. Just as the gods made weapons from the bones of Rishi Dadhichi and defeated the demons, so the lotus flower shaped its own edible arrangement, call it fruit or pod, took on the name bari,

and gave bari its recognition.

Whatever that may be, just as Munilal and Dhunilal had forgotten their tea and refreshments, they had not forgotten their question. Again and again, the same thought rose in both their minds-

"The world is afflicted by sorrow, and the world is afflicted by happiness."

Munilal said-

"Sir, when the world is afflicted by both sorrow and happiness, what, then, is a person: sorrowful or happy?"

On hearing Munilal's question, Gopal Babu's mind smiled, though he did not open his mouth and laugh. It is known that laughter is a strange sort of play. People laugh at good things, and sometimes they do not laugh even at bad things. This stands before everyone's eyes, and so it cannot be denied.

Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, for today, understand only this much: just as there are steps of sorrow, there are also steps of happiness. Just as there are many shades of sorrow, there are many shades of happiness too. We shall think further on this another day." ❑

Sorrow and Happiness

☰

Today marked the fifteenth day since any real conversation had taken place between Munilal, Dhunilal and Gopal Babu. Just as restlessness arises between lovers, or between two companions, when they meet after a delay, fail to meet, or are late in meeting, something similar had begun to stir here. This should not be understood as the swelling tide of the sea between lovers or companions, where each declares, "I have won, I have won." Who has truly won is something only the future will reveal. In the present, only the hope of victory arrives. Whatever comes or goes, let the one who comes know it, and let the one who goes know it. Let lovers know it; let companions and fellow workers know it.

From the beginning, the world has carried within it a long chain of wonders. Everyone knows that fire arose from the friction of wood, and that fire burnt vast forests and turned them into fields. Even today, in the eastern regions of the country, in hilly and forested areas, cultivation is practised through the jhum system. That is, the forests and scrub upon hill land are burnt, and farming is carried out upon the ash that remains. But wonder does not end merely with the origin of fire.

There is a long chain of wonders. Yet apart from the chain we see in the form of history, there exists another chain of wonder as well.

On one side, consider the moment of birth. On the other, consider the entire span of human life upon this earth, perhaps extending to four hundred years in memory and reckoning. There is the tender age before twenty, and then, beyond twenty, the stages of maturing, adulthood and old age, from rawness to ripeness. We understand the difference, and we also see it. Just as the raw mango becomes chutney, the half-ripe and mature mango becomes pickle, and when fully ripe, people still eat it even if only the pulp near the skin remains, so it is with human beings too. From childlike innocence to alertness, maturity, youth, middle age and old age, all stages exist. Whatever else may be thought, life itself is one. Everyone possesses his own life.

Among so many lives, how many people live life by understanding it as life, and how many live it as though it were not life at all? This is the second chain of wonder: even those who live life are unable to understand life fully. Is this not, in itself, a wondrous thing? Whatever has happened, or whatever is happening, let the world and the people of the world know it. What concern do Gopal Babu, Munilal or Dhunilal have with that?

After returning from school, Gopal Babu sat on a chair in the veranda. A thought arose in his mind: today it had been fifteen days since he had properly met Munilal and Dhunilal. Of course, he saw them in school during class, but neither did he speak to them, nor did they come near him. Only when a problem stands before a person does he rise, steady himself, and begin

searching for its solution.

At once, a third thought arose and settled within Gopal Babu's mind. It was this: in this world, a true companion is one who may or may not accept every thought of the other, yet if both continue walking along the path between them, life will surely reveal itself, sooner or later. A feeling of satisfaction arose in Gopal Babu's mind, and along with it, reverence too awakened.

Just as Munilal thought within himself, so did Dhunilal. In the school where Gopal Babu taught, there were four hundred students. Out of that number, the share of one student in Gopal Babu's free time would perhaps amount to no more than an hour in a month. If they had not met him for fifteen days, then perhaps they had done the right thing. After all, in the meeting of the moon and the chakori bird, one must remember that one remains in the sky while the other remains upon the earth. The distance between earth and sky can be understood only when one observes the threefold movement of nature and shapes one's own movement accordingly. But for those living upon the earth, this is difficult. This does not mean that the same force creates only human beings and not gods or demons.

Nor can it be denied that the same iron becomes a rocket, a gun, a sickle and a hoe. Whatever may be said- Munilal and Dhunilal reflected among themselves and decided that both of them should go together to Gopal Babu's quarters that very day. If they found him free, that would be very good. By finding him free, they meant this: if someone else was with him, then perhaps not, but if he was alone, why would they not get time? Surely they would.

Thinking this, both boys returned home after school, had their refreshments, and then came along the road leading to Gopal Babu's quarters. When they looked towards his doorway, they saw Gopal Babu sitting alone.

Just as Munilal and Dhunilal saw Gopal Babu sitting alone, so Gopal Babu too saw Munilal and Dhunilal walking along the road like travellers. The moment he saw them, he felt like calling out to them. But his own refined mind told him that doing so would go beyond courtesy. It would go beyond courtesy because, if they were on their way to attend to some family or social duty, then stopping them midway would surely become an interruption. Another thought also arose in his mind: how much should one speak first from one's own side? Not everything suits everyone equally.

Gopal Babu was still lost in thought when, meanwhile, the two boys turned off the main road and took the path leading towards his quarters. Here a question arises: what is the difference between quarters and home? Quarters are a place where one lives only for a few days. A home is not merely that. It is not simply the dwelling place of one generation, but of an entire lineage.

When they were still ten steps away from Gopal Babu's doorway, Munilal and Dhunilal joined their hands in greeting and said-

"Pranam, Gurudev."

On hearing the word Gurudev, Gopal Babu's mind flew at once to a sakhi (couplet) of Kabir Das- "Gu andhiyara Janiye, ru mithai agyanta gyan te, guru nam hai tas."

(Know gu as darkness, and ru as light. The one who removes ignorance through knowledge is called Guru.)

As soon as his wandering thought returned to the earth, the movement of Gopal Babu's mind changed. What changed was this: perhaps humility was awakening within the two students, and so they had used a word filled with reverence. It is also said that where there is reverence for someone, there is trust as well. In a single expression, this may be called reverential trust, or trust filled with reverence.

Whatever one may say, Gopal Babu, in keeping with the role of a high school teacher, blessed them and said-

"When I saw you both walking southwards along the road, I thought you were going somewhere on some errand. But when I saw you turn from the road and come this way, I understood that you were coming here."

Munilal and Dhunilal had childlike minds. With innocent feeling, both spoke together-

"Gurudev, since the day we came to your quarters and spoke about life, our minds have been restless to come again. But you are the teacher of more than four hundred students. In that, how much time could possibly be our share? That is why we did not come."

Hearing the thoughts of the two boys, Gopal Babu was delighted. As delight arose within him, he felt that there was certainly a curiosity about life in their minds. Curiosity takes many forms. It exists in everyone's mind and awakens there too, but curiosity about life is the finest of all. The desire to live in this world belongs not only to human beings made of the five elements, but to every creature born upon the earth, even though each

knows that once born, death is inevitable.

Everyone knows that even with a son like Ram, Dasharath died. In other words, even Ram could not save him. With a maternal uncle like Krishna and a father like Arjun, Abhimanyu still died at a tender age. This is not the time to discuss the Mahabharata; otherwise, one could speak of how Shri Krishna and the Pandavas went to Amarkantak, how Padmanabh abducted Draupadi, how the Pandavas were defeated in battle, and how, after fighting again on Krishna's advice, they finally emerged victorious.

After hearing the thoughts of the two boys, Munilal and Dhunilal, Gopal Babu's mind settled. It settled because he felt that boys of a lower class could scarcely think beyond this. Therefore, rather than asking further questions, it would be better to offer his own response. Changing the direction of his thought, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, how are things otherwise?"

As soon as they heard the words how are things, the seed of thought sprouted in both their minds. Both boys began speaking together. Seeing them speak at the same time, Gopal Babu gestured with his hand for silence and said-

"One at a time. Both of you speak in turn."

Of course, both mouths fell silent, but both minds still fluttered with the desire to speak first. Inside, Gopal Babu's heart cooled as though it had received the sacred water poured over the head on Judshital (a Hindu festival held on April 15), yet he kept himself restrained.

Just as Munilal was clear in speech, he was also quick by nature. Dhunilal did not possess that quality. He had a natural art of speaking slowly and calmly. In his

haste, Munilal placed his thought first and said-

"Gurudev, what is happiness, and what is sorrow?"

Gopal Babu noted Munilal's question as the first entry in the diary of his mind.

Meanwhile, just as Munilal paused after raising his question, Dhunilal said-

"Gurudev, what is the threefold force of nature?"

Hearing both questions, Gopal Babu balanced his thoughts inwardly and said-

"It is like life and death."

While speaking, Gopal Babu suddenly fell silent midway. The reason for his silence was that, when he turned back and looked towards the path of his own thought, his mind itself accepted that too many questions had risen before him. After all, in a large bank, thick bundles of money are counted. But where there is an account of the earning and spending of every single coin, the situation must certainly be different.

When Gopal Babu tried to measure the weight of the questions in his mind, he found himself halted by their depth. On one side stood the question of happiness and sorrow, and of sorrow and happiness in life. On the other stood the question of the threefold force of nature. Similarly, on one side lay the question of life itself, and on the other there would surely arise the question of the purpose of life.

Gopal Babu stilled his mind like the water of a pond. In the meantime, Munilal spoke up-

"Gurudev, please discuss happiness and sorrow first. Later we shall think about sorrow and happiness and the other questions."

Munilal's thought matched Gopal Babu's own. It matched in this sense: just as the ocean is formed drop by drop, so too this world is formed life by life. In that case, removing even a single drop from within it is no child's play. Yet when some thought has arisen in a child's mind, to suppress it immediately is like covering a blazing fire with dust and earth.

Both boys were students of the ninth class, and they studied a little Sanskrit as well. It would therefore be good to begin his reflection with a Sanskrit verse. Indeed, it was a fine thing to recall one's own samskara and culture while discussing life and the purpose of life. Such a stream, flowing from the Himalaya, irrigates even stone and pours nectar into the mouth of the earth.

Gopal Babu said-

"No one is the giver of happiness or sorrow. To think that another person gives them is poor understanding. To say 'I do this' is empty pride. The world is bound by the thread of its own actions."

"No one gives happiness or sorrow to anyone else. To believe that one person gives them to another is itself misguided understanding. Mahavir too has said that the self is the creator of happiness, and the self is also the creator of sorrow."

In the course of speaking, Gopal Babu became emotionally absorbed and spoke with feeling. But when he turned back and examined his own thought, he realised that he had moved too far ahead. Just as Krishna, on the battlefield of the Mahabharata, suddenly pulled back the reins of the chariot drawn by seven horses, Gopal Babu inwardly drew back the flow of his own thought in a single moment and said-

“Boys, keep this relationship alive in this way. Just as the world is immeasurable, human beings too remain forever ready to search its depths. Keep coming and going like this. Some conversation will always continue to take place. Of course, conversation has no fixed boundary or measure, but it can still be held within the current of life.”

Hearing the words coming and going, curiosity awakened in Munilal’s mind, and hopeful curiosity awakened in Dhunilal’s mind as well. Dhunilal said-

“Gurudev, we shall come every day.”

Stating his own fixed routine, Gopal Babu said-

“School hours are spent at school. The rest of the time I remain at my quarters.” ❑

What Is Life, and What Is the Purpose of Life?

☰

Call it coincidence, or call it the movement of time. Just as Gopal Babu's mind was becoming deeply satisfied through the relationship forming with Munilal and Dhunilal, so too, in Munilal and Dhunilal, affection for their relationship with Gopal Babu was bringing a sense of fulfilment to the mind.

Munilal and Dhunilal stood, as it were, on the boundary between darkness and light, like the flickering play of fireflies. At times, darkness seemed to move towards light within their minds, and at times light seemed to move towards darkness. This was natural. When some necessary task enters life, the process of giving it an active form begins. This takes place on both planes: on the plane of thought and on the ground of life. Whatever happens, what concern do Gopal Babu, Munilal or Dhunilal have with that? What matters is this: just as Gopal Babu was inwardly seeing the discovery of a precious gem, Munilal and Dhunilal too were seeing the discovery of their own lives.

After their discussion, when Munilal and Dhunilal

began to take leave from Gopal Babu's place, a tender feeling of attainment awakened not only in the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal, but also in Gopal Babu's mind. Life is life, not a joke. Amid the intelligence and judgement of seven billion people, life still remains a riddle, yet no one has been able to reach its full depth. Is that life? Life is a vast science. One must always try to understand it. For those who come to know life, life becomes a blessing. For those who cannot understand life, life remains a curse.

At night, after taking his meal, as soon as Gopal Babu reached his bed, Munilal and Dhunilal suddenly began to dance in his mind. Into that dancing mind descended Kabir Das's lines- "Guru to aisa chahiye, Shishya se kuchh n leya. Shishya to aisa chahiye, Guru ko sub kuchh deya."

(A guru should be such that he takes nothing from the disciple.

A disciple should be such that he gives everything to the guru.)

As the words of the couplet settled in his mind, Gopal Babu's heart melted. When the curiosity of an inquisitive person awakens, there arises the need for a guide to show the path. If, along with one's own life, one can also make another's life truly alive, that is the greatest craft in the world. All at once, it seemed to Gopal Babu as if he had found a root herb of life itself. Everyone sees it, and everyone says as much that we must look at life in its seed-form. Historians too give one age the name Beejvapan Kal, the period of seed-sowing. Through this, an entire age comes to stand before us.

On one side, just as Munilal and Dhunilal were

dancing in Gopal Babu's mind, so too, on the emotional ground of Munilal and Dhunilal, the meaning of Kabir Das's lines was taking form. Those lines of Kabir Das were-

"Sanche guru ke paksh me, Man ko de thaharai, Chanchal se Nischal bhaya, nahi aabe nahi jaye."

(On the side of the true guru, let the mind come to rest.

The restless becomes steady, and neither comes nor goes.)

On one side, lying on their beds, the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal were restless. On the other side, Gopal Babu's mind too was restless. Of course, the discipline of concentration that Gopal Babu had cultivated had not yet developed in Munilal and Dhunilal. Therefore, a difference in their ways of seeing the world was inevitable.

Call it coincidence, or call it the movement of time: the next day was Sunday. Just as Gopal Babu would be completely free from work, that is, from duty, so too would Munilal and Dhunilal. Both boys remembered what Gopal Babu had told them-

"The time on a holiday is free, so you may come whenever you wish." Holding their minds to the hope of the next day, Munilal and Dhunilal went to sleep.

At daybreak, Munilal reached Dhunilal's house. Seeing Munilal, Dhunilal began turning over his thoughts and said-

"Brother, it is good that today is a holiday. Just as Gopal Babu will be free, so are we. Therefore, it will be better for us to go there, to Gopal Babu's place."

Gopal Babu, however, had his own routine. He had shaped his life according to the seasons. In the summer months, clothes worn on the body become much dirtier than they do in winter. Besides, if one adjusts oneself to the demands of the season and completes the necessary tasks of life accordingly, that is certainly better. Thinking in this way, Gopal Babu washed his clothes early in the morning during summer.

According to his regular routine, Gopal Babu was sitting on the chair at his doorway, gazing steadily at the world before him, when he saw Munilal and Dhunilal turn off the main road and take the path towards his quarters, walking briskly. He himself already desired to speak with them. Seeing the two boys, his mind cooled and settled like Judshital (a Hindu festival of cooling).

From a little distance away, Munilal's eyes wandered over the bamboo line that Gopal Babu had set up in front of his doorway for drying clothes. He was looking because it seemed that Gopal Babu had already completed the day's work before sunrise. By this I mean the kind of salaried man who washes his own clothes with his own hands. I am not speaking of those who wear clothes washed by others. I am speaking of a teacher like Gopal Babu.

In words, all teachers say that they are alike. But whether there are differences in work, less in one place and more in another, let them say that with their own mouths. People like Gopal Babu are not limited to Gopal Babu alone. There are many such people in society. They may not possess every quality like God, but one cannot deny that they stand ahead in certain individual qualities, whether one, two, three or four.

There is Chhantha Panditji in the village. He performs his worship at three in the morning. You may say that three o’clock still belongs to the night, so how can it be counted as today’s worship? He is not going to accept your view. He is devoted to his own mind, intelligence, judgement and inner self, and so he will not accept it. His belief is that from three o’clock onwards, from the last quarter of the night, night begins to turn into day. Therefore, not at three but at a quarter to three itself, he rises, cleanses himself, and sits for worship. His wife is the same. Before Panditji sits for worship, Lakshmi has already arranged everything required for the ritual.

By the time the worship ends, the incense stick too has burnt away. So he first places the incense holder aside, and the work of tomorrow, that is, what most people would consider tomorrow’s work because they perform worship at eight or nine o’clock, he completes today itself. Before a man of action, even Kabir Baba falls a little behind. He falls behind on this question: should the activity of life begin from today’s side or from tomorrow’s? Tomorrow means both, the one that is coming and the one that has gone. Both are needed. Whatever it may be, let it be.

Munilal fixed his eyes on Gopal Babu’s clothes spread out upon the bamboo line at the doorway. In them he saw the pattern of Gopal Babu’s daily conduct. A thought arose in his mind: surely this much of Gopal Babu’s blessing had already risen to his own head, that he had improved his conduct and made it different from that of others. Apart from going to school, if he went anywhere for any work, he would certainly inform his mother and father. It should not happen that his parents

came to know of something only after a month.

On one side, Munilal's eyes remained fixed upon the clothes, and on the other, both his feet continued moving towards the doorway. About a yard before reaching him, Munilal and Dhunilal joined both their hands, as though they had come to ask for something, and said to Gopal Babu-

"Gurudev, since today is the Sunday holiday..."

Munilal had not even properly brought forth the thought in his heart when Gopal Babu interrupted him and said-

"Boys, first go inside and tell your aunt that you feel like having tea."

Of course, even what the eyes see may prove false, and this is something that stands before everyone. We all see it. Gopal Babu's wife, Sushila, was deeply devoted to him. Devotion, too, takes many forms, but let that remain aside for now. Here it existed within the natural bond between husband and wife. The surroundings had changed so greatly that the fields and farmlands over which society once spent day and night in quarrels, abuse and beatings had now lost much of their former value. The condition of fields and farmlands, caught between village and city life, stands visible before everyone. This does not mean that brothers, kinsmen, mothers and sisters have stopped claiming upon their lips that "we are the gurus of the world." Whatever that may be, let it remain so.

After the greetings and enquiries, all three of them, Gopal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal, sat together on chairs arranged in a triangle. Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, your question from yesterday remains like

an unpaid debt. So I shall answer that first."

Both boys, Munilal and Dhunilal, began searching their minds for yesterday's question, but they could not remember it. Another question had already sprung up in Dhunilal's mind. He had become somewhat freer of hesitation, as naturally happens when a relationship grows. So, without preface or concealment, Dhunilal said-

"Gurudev, in our village we see that when a snake bites someone, one person goes to Laheriasarai to have the poison treated, another has it cured through charms and exorcism, and someone else goes to the shrine of Bishahara, where drums and mridangs are beaten and the poison is drawn out through the utterance of a human-god."

Dhunilal still had more to say, but meanwhile Gopal Babu stopped him and said-

"Boy, the world is full of duality, and society too is full of duality. So, for now, remove all that from your sight and return to the earlier question: what should be the purpose of life?"

Like Munilal, Dhunilal too raised both ears like the young of a deer. Seeing their attentiveness, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, first listen to it in a single phrase, like a title. Afterwards, I shall explain it in a way that you can understand."

Between question and answer, not even the slightest doubt remained in the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal. Their hearts accepted that whatever Gurudev said- they would certainly receive as a quality worth adopting.

Gopal Babu said-

"Knowledge, philosophy and character should be harmonised in such a way that they continue to grow into integration. Through that integration, life becomes directed, and within it awakens the power to shape its own purpose. This triad is an invaluable jewel of life."

Just as, in a sudden flash of brightness, a person's eyes both function and fail at the same time, so a moment of bewilderment arose in the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal.

Of course, both boys studied in a lower class of the high school. Some understanding of the world had certainly begun to reach them. Munilal said-

"Gurudev, please explain it a little more clearly."

Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, I serve here as a teacher in the high school. I am bound to perform eight hours of duty. Out of the twenty-four hours of the day, the remaining sixteen hours belong to me, and they are my own wealth. I have made that wealth invaluable. So whenever you feel like it, come and learn."

On hearing the word invaluable, Munilal's ears rose afresh, and so did Dhunilal's. Seeing both boys become alert again, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, knowledge is my head, philosophy is my heart, and character is my hands and feet. In the body, the three are joined together, and all three work in an integrated form. You also see in society that there is inequality in speech. Some people never speak lies at all. Some speak half lies and half truths, and it is this mixture of the two that has created confusion."

Neither Munilal nor Dhunilal fully understood the thought in Gopal Babu's mind. But on hearing the words "has created confusion", Munilal asked-

"What confusion has it created?"

Smiling, Gopal Babu said-

"Whether it leans towards half falsehood or towards truth, let that remain for today. I shall explain it another day. Come whenever you feel like coming. Our conversation will continue."

Munilal and Dhunilal both bowed to Gopal Babu and took their leave. ❑

Superstition

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The relationship forming between Gopal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal was also creating a new emotional ground. Until now, we all know that, just as the sky stands at one boundary and the earth at another, leaving aside for the moment any discussion of the third boundary, the netherworld, there also exists a lasting affectionate relationship between the two, or one may call it a beloved relationship.

You may ask: what is an affectionate relationship? Yes, the question certainly exists. Between the two, however, there are two kinds of relationship. One kind is this: where there is earth, there is also sky. It may also be said that because the sky exists, the earth too has its existence. Just as, within one body, there is earth in the form of the body, so too there is sky in the form of mind, intelligence, judgement and soul. But leave that aside for now. In the earth and sky that we see with ordinary eyes, this much is visible: the earth lies below, and above the earth stretches the sky without limit.

Between the two, that is, between earth and sky, whether one calls it a bridge or an emotional relationship taking shape in the world of feeling, it certainly creates a new ground of emotion. Whatever it

creates belongs to the feeling-world of those who are moved by feeling. What concern do Gopal Babu, Munilal or Dhunilal have with that? Just as everyone stands upon the earth beneath the sky, so those three too stand upon the earth beneath the same sky. Gopal Babu is a teacher in the high school, and in that very high school Munilal and Dhunilal are students of the ninth class.

Between sky and earth, whether as a bridge or as a relationship, there is both relationship and no relationship. This may indeed be called distance. Even if both are called creations of the same nature, within that creation too, sattva, rajas and tamas continue to perform their own wonders. These are also called the threefold force of nature. Such a quality exists in that very force which can turn a king into a pauper and a pauper into a king, and can also undo them. During rain, just as everything from the earth to the sky becomes one, so it is through air and sunlight as well. Their relationship is both the means and the end. Whether we call it duality or relationship is certainly a question worth considering.

On the basis of present-day science, we accept at least this much: the sky stands upon the earth by means of bridges of many-coloured air. Though, of course, the earth too has no fixed resting place. Geographers have also been saying from the beginning that the earth is round, and so everything is round. Then what is the sky like? Accept the sky as emptiness, as a vast silence. The sun too is round, the stars and constellations are round, and the moon is certainly round. It may also be that our own eyes are round, and therefore everything appears round to us.

Just as between the sky and the earth there is the movement and working of air, so too there is the movement and working of sunlight, the light of the sun. We see and accept that within twenty-four hours there are twelve hours of day and twelve hours of night. Here, do not suppose that I am trying to show the increase or decrease within those twelve hours. That is plainly before us. Just as the day in Magh shrivels and becomes as small as a chick, the day of Baisakh and Jeth can also become a fiery champion. We see this, and we accept it.

Even in the division between day and night, however, there is dishonesty. Just as the gods practised deception in the distribution of nectar after the churning of the ocean, so something similar has happened between night and day. There are places where the light of the sun has not reached even after so many days, and by so many days I mean since the sun came into being. Therefore, the sun too still carries a longing to see the world. Of course, you may also say that the earth itself was formed from the sun. Whatever it is, wherever it is, let it remain there. If the sun wishes to keep its light only up to ninety degrees of latitude, let it do so. That depends upon its own will.

Just as the world is filled with equality, it is also filled with inequality. Amid this equality and inequality stand Gopal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal. We hear, and we also say with our own mouths-

"The water lily dwells in water, the moon dwells in the sky. To whomsoever the heart belongs, that one remains near."

This is not true only of the moon and the water lily. Something similar was also taking shape between Gopal

Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal.

Just as affection or dislike keeps digging into the mind, so it was with Gopal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal. Here, by Dhunilal, one should not understand Kabir, though he too belonged to the Dhuniya lineage. But let us not speak now of lineage and its branches. Let us speak, for the moment, of Munilal, Dhunilal and Gopal Babu. Gopal Babu is a high school teacher, and Munilal and Dhunilal are his disciples, learners, students, pupils, call them what one will.

As Gopal Babu lay on his bed, a thought arose in his mind: if Munilal and Dhunilal came today, it would first be necessary to introduce his own capacity. After all, human beings are human beings. If someone distributes a sweet thought, it naturally arises in the mind of the one receiving a share that the giver must have a great heap of sweetness stored with him, a treasure like Kubera's that would never be exhausted. Yet human life, coming down through hundreds of thousands of years, remains even today full of want, longing even for food and clothing. Lying there on his bed, Gopal Babu became resolved.

On the other side, childlike Munilal and Dhunilal were innocent and playful like young boys, and wholly free from the burden of family responsibility. Early in the morning, they thought that just as people like them sometimes observe a day-long fast, they too would do the same. They would go to Gopal Babu's place, return from there, pick up their schoolbags and leave for school. They would not sit down to eat. Thinking this, both boys reached Gopal Babu's place.

Gopal Babu had already resolved to speak the

matter hidden within his heart, and so his mind was stirred and full. Here one should understand that everyone in society considers himself honest, yet when it comes to speaking of earnings and income, people will certainly lie. This is natural. Even a thief gives up stealing during the bright fortnight, knowing that people will recognise him in the light. In that sense, even the thief becomes a saint. Society, after all, is society.

Seeing Munilal and Dhunilal, Gopal Babu felt as though he should turn his own dwelling into something like a brahmachari ashram. There is, however, some confusion here, for the definition of brahmachari carries many shades of meaning. Whatever that may be, a rule is a rule. According to their custom, Munilal and Dhunilal, standing two steps away, joined both hands and said-

"Pranam, Gurudev."

Filled with joy, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, just as the mind becomes satisfied when a need is fulfilled at the proper time, so today my own mind feels fulfilled."

Seeing Gopal Babu's satisfied expression, Munilal said-

"Gurudev, today you are gracious. So for the two of us as well...?"

Just then, Gopal Babu's wife arrived with refreshments. Seeing the food in his wife's hands, Gopal Babu said-

"One cannot worship Gopal (krishna-god) on an empty stomach. First, let everyone take refreshments. Afterwards, we shall talk for two hours. After that, I shall

prepare to go to school, and so will you."

After the refreshments, as they drank tea, Gopal Babu prepared himself for further questions and answers and said-

"Boys, I shall answer your question about superstition later. First, let me tell you my own thoughts."

The gracefulness of Gopal Babu's thoughts seemed to enchant both boys, Munilal and Dhunilal, and the whole atmosphere became calm and still. Seeing the silence, Dhunilal said-

"Gurudev, you had begun to say something. Why did you fall silent midway?"

Gopal Babu said-

"Do not think of it as silence. I am inwardly joining the beginning and the end of what I wish to say. After all, whatever else you may be, both of you are still children."

Munilal was slightly moved, but Dhunilal's mind melted completely like a fully ripened banana. Shaking his head, Dhunilal said-

"There is nothing hidden in that."

Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, just as in school, so too in the village and society, most people say that the root of all trouble is Gopal Babu. But what do I care for that? The current of thought flows together with my work. You too should understand this: just as my father built his life upon his own earnings, so have I. I possess only the income that comes from eight hours of duty, my salary, and upon that I have built my life. Therefore, I do not care what

others think. Like everyone else, I receive my salary from the school, but I do not earn extra money by giving private tuition at home. Let others say what they will, whether they themselves do it or not. But I shall not abandon my own path merely because someone says something. Therefore, just as everyone in the school considers me troublesome, I too see that those whose own conduct has collapsed are often the very people in whose hands the flag of religion flies."

All at once, the heaviness within Gopal Babu's mind came out, and his heart felt lighter. Like the bud of a flower opening into bloom, Gopal Babu's mind unfolded. A gentle sweetness came upon his lips. Seeing Gopal Babu brighten in this way, Dhunilal said-

"Gurudev, time is moving ahead, and the question is being left behind."

Fully satisfied, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, before settling your old debt, I too wish to ask for one debt from you."

Neither Munilal nor Dhunilal understood what he meant by cash and debt. So, like curious children, both spoke together-

"What is that, Gurudev?"

Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, the question of what is worship of the stomach is now a debt owed by both of you. Its answer will remain pending. For now, I shall answer the earlier question."

Munilal and Dhunilal had in fact forgotten their own question, but when Gopal Babu mentioned it in the course of speaking, both remembered it at once.

Before beginning his answer, Gopal Babu cast his eyes over both Munilal and Dhunilal. He felt that they were not restless exactly, but they were certainly eager. Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, superstition is not of one kind alone. It has many forms, according to level and according to time. Therefore, it should not be understood as a seasonal illness, but as an inborn illness. Just as among the gods there are those who are born and those who are unborn, so it is here too."

Munilal asked-

"Gurudev, what is born, and what is unborn?"

Gopal Babu said-

"Born means a disease that remains all the time, while seasonal means one that arrives with a particular season, what you call a samaiya (seasonal) illness."

Seeing both boys silent, Gopal Babu continued-

"Even when the disease is one, many systems of treatment have been followed among us. There is a verse in Sanskrit; "Vaidya vadanti kafpittamrudhikars, Jyotiruvido grahgatin parivartaya nti, Bhutabhishang iti bhutvido vadanti, prachin karma badalvada munyo vadanti."

(The physicians say it is a disorder of phlegm, bile and disturbed wind in the body.

The astrologers say the movement of the planets has turned adverse.

Those who believe in spirits say a shadow of ghosts has fallen upon you.

The sages say it is the fruit of your own past actions.)

"The physician says, 'The cause of your illness lies in the disturbance of phlegm, bile and disordered wind within the body.' The astrologer says, 'The movement of your planets has become unfavourable.' The believer in spirits says, 'A ghostly shadow has fallen upon you.' And the sages say, 'It is the fruit of your own actions.' Between these lies both faith and superstition, and therein lies the root of confusion." ❑

Contentious People

☰

There would be a holiday at school the next day. Therefore, just as the teachers would be free from duty, so too would the boys and girls. They would also have an opportunity to speak to their hearts' content. You may ask, what does it mean to speak to one's heart's content? Among people, it means to speak out everything held within the mind and empty the heart completely. That is what it means to speak fully and freely.

As soon as they moved beyond the boundary of the school, Dhunilal called out to Munilal from behind-

"Munilal bhai, please shorten your steps a little. I am running behind you."

Munilal thought to himself that if he stopped for just a moment, Dhunilal's trouble of running would surely come to an end. So it seemed proper to pause for five or ten seconds.

Seeing Munilal standing still, Dhunilal stopped running. He remained in one place and first drew and released four or five long breaths. This gradually steadied the movement of his breathing. He thought to himself that by the time he reached Munilal bhai, he too would have brought his tired breath under control. That was exactly what he did.

As soon as Dhunilal came near him, Munilal asked-

"Dhuni bhai, why were you so late?"

Until now, Munilal had addressed him simply as Dhunilal. But ever since both of them had come into contact with Gopal Babu, the movement of their lives had improved, and with it, their thoughts had naturally improved as well. Therefore, both had begun to use words of brotherhood with each other. In our village society, it has long been shaped in such a way that, just as we call our father's brother kaka or chacha, we also address members of other families in the village and society by the same names. This is a thread in the philosophy of harmony, a brick in the foundation of an egalitarian society. Within this very way of thinking, the relationship of brotherhood also exists.

Dhunilal said-

"Muni bhai, as soon as I heard the announcement about tomorrow's holiday, I felt that I should meet Gopal Chacha. So when I reached near the office, the staff room, I saw that Gopal Chacha was speaking in a very heated manner. Of course, a childlike student should not involve himself in disputes among them, that is, among the teachers. So I turned back at once, and that is why I was delayed."

Joining their thoughts together in conversation, both boys moved ahead. After walking a few steps, Munilal said-

"Dhuni bhai, let us go home for now. After eating in the afternoon, both of us shall go to Gopal Chacha's place and try to understand why you saw Chacha speaking so heatedly among the school staff. At the very least, this much will come of it: on one side, we did not

say anything among the teachers that might have hurt their feelings, and on the other, the curiosity born of affection will also be satisfied."

Firm in his own thought, Gopal Babu came out of the office, the staff room, and started towards his quarters. Of course, just as fire begins to calm when the burning material is removed, Gopal Babu's fire of thought too had gradually lessened and grown quiet. Yet, even within that quietness, like fire hidden beneath ash, enough warmth remained for him not to keep his thought to himself alone, but to make it known to children and elders alike. For that, after all, both those who know and those who can make others know are needed. If only two playful boys, Munilal and Dhunilal, were available, even they would surely be of some help. Just as the effect of time falls upon life, it also falls upon the thoughts of the mind.

It was six o'clock in the evening. The day was ending, and night was arriving. In the meantime, the sun too was gathering back its suspended strength. Gopal Babu sat on a chair before his doorway, absorbed in worry over how a practising saint was being forgotten and pushed aside. Before his eyes still remained the fact that Acharya Ramchandra Shukla, in his history of Hindi literature, had discussed the saint Raidas as a nirgun saint, not in great detail, but honestly and according to his capacity.

At that very time, Munilal and Dhunilal came and stood before Gopal Babu. Seating the two boys on two chairs, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, just as Guptji, Maithilisharan Gupt, has written in Yashodhara, 'Aryaputra has already given his

test; now it is my turn,' so now your turn has come."

Of course, neither of the two boys fully understood Gopal Babu's thought, yet it was not that they failed to understand it altogether, as one might fail to grasp a long narrative poem. That too was there. Even while remaining somewhat distant from the full meaning of the thought, both boys understood this much: perhaps Gurudev needed them for some work.

Both boys, Munilal and Dhunilal, spoke together,

"We are ready."

They had not formed one thought after thinking together. Yet just as the equator, the middle line of the world, lies at zero degrees latitude, and at equal distances to the north and south there are similar seasons and similar kinds of produce, something similar had happened on the emotional ground of Munilal and Dhunilal. That is why their voices rose together.

Relating to Munilal and Dhunilal the matter that had troubled him that day, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, from our own earth, the practising saints are being neglected and forgotten."

Munilal and Dhunilal, students of the ninth class, could hardly understand who a practising saint was, or what it meant to be neglected and forgotten. Like the refrain of a devotional song, both spoke together-

"Gurudev, when Kabir Baba himself has said- 'If one finds a guru even by offering one's head, one should still consider it cheap,' then whatever command you give, we are ready to fulfil it to the best of our strength."

Hearing the thoughts of Munilal and Dhunilal, Gopal Babu felt as though he had found a lost pot of

ghee. In his mind he decided: whatever has happened has happened. One who does not understand even this much should know that no one is truly neglected and forgotten as long as even one living being in the world continues to stand as a companion and fulfil that companionship.

Cooling his thoughts with the water of calmness, Gopal Babu said-

“Boys, tomorrow I have been invited on the occasion of Raidas Jayanti. You both should come with me. Speak whatever little you can and offer your tribute.”

For one thing, it was a new task. Added to that, for boys of such a young age, raising their faces upon a public stage, in a place they had neither seen nor heard of before, was beyond the reach of childlike imagination.

Munilal looked towards Dhunilal and nudged him with his eyes. But Dhunilal’s mind was tangled in its own rhythm like cotton caught upon the bowstring of a carder. His speech fell silent.

Seeing both boys speechless, Gopal Babu understood that they considered themselves utterly unskilled. To turn the unskilled into the skilled, that indeed is true artistry. Smiling, Gopal Babu said-

“Boys, who Raidas was and what kind of person he was, that is the main question. So listen carefully.”

Just as a singer in a kirtan troupe, or a dancer in a dance troupe, stands prepared and eager to step onto the stage, so too Munilal and Dhunilal had to be guided in that way. What is taught in the realm of thought may sometimes prove unsuitable in the realm of practice. Yet whatever the case may be, this much is also true: just as

Munilal is a student of the ninth class, so too is Dhunilal. Therefore, in their childlike state, they are certainly deserving of forgiveness.

Bringing their hesitant thoughts onto a more positive path, Gopal Babu said-

“Boys, Raidas belonged to the Chamar caste and lived in Kashi by practising the traditional work of his caste, that is, he earned his living by stitching shoes.”

Munilal said-

“Gurudev, I had once gone to my maternal uncle’s village. At night, after eating and drinking, when I went to bed to sleep, my uncle began telling the story of Sheet and Basant. On other days, as soon as I lay down upon the bed, sleep would come at once. But that day, in the rhythm of my uncle’s storytelling, who knows where sleep ran away? Like the other listeners, I too began giving responses of encouragement. When half the night had passed, that is, after midnight, my uncle released us and said- ‘Now go to sleep. I shall tell you the rest another day.’ I still remember that story exactly as I heard it. In the same way, if you tell us about Dada Raidas like a story, we shall remember it all our lives.”

Gopal Babu carefully reflected upon Munilal’s thought and said-

“Boys, whatever has happened so far has taken place within the brotherhood of the school, that is, within the world of teachers. Some have already joined mouths together and called us contentious people. That is one boundary.”

As soon as the word contentious fell upon their ears, Munilal’s and Dhunilal’s ears began to tingle, for they had never heard the word before. Yet their minds

still held this much confidence: after all, Gurudev was Gopal Chacha. Munilal asked-

"Gurudev, what does contentious mean?"

Of course, while speaking, Gopal Babu's own mind had warned him that he was using an unfamiliar word. But immediately his mind encouraged him again and said: until the unfamiliar becomes familiar, how will they learn to see and understand the world? Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, since the programme is tomorrow, we must first prepare ourselves for it. But since this issue has arisen in the meantime, it would be good to look at it once as well."

Dhunilal said-

"Yes, that will certainly have to be done."

Receiving agreement along with support, and support along with agreement, Gopal Babu said-

"Move forward in the race of action. Contentious people are those who stand upon the boundary of dispute for the sake of their own share and create quarrels. That is the limit of contentiousness, and those who stand upon that limit are contentious people."

Hearing this, Munilal and Dhunilal felt as one feels when trying to see one's own face and features, though they remain hidden even while being part of oneself. Dhunilal said-

"Gurudev, tomorrow's programme is now upon our heads. So from this very moment, we must close our eyes to everything else and devote ourselves fully to it."

When a lost path suddenly reaches familiar ground, the happiness that arises in the mind was the very happiness Gopal Babu felt on hearing Dhunilal's

thought. He said-

"Both of you, listen carefully. Bhakt Raidas was a very great saint. By caste, he was a Chamar. He was a great seeker. What a seeker truly is, we shall not discuss now. For the moment, understand only this much: Raidas was a seeker of the highest order. He possessed deep self-realisation. He lived in Kashi and remained absorbed in spiritual reflection day and night.

"Just as the watchman who guards our fields has a small hut, Raidas too had a small dwelling in which he lived. His family consisted of only two people, himself and his wife. There, he worked with shoes. Whatever he earned from that work sustained the household. When he became free from work, that is, after the hours meant for labour had passed, he devoted himself to spiritual practice."

"One day, a sadhu came to meet Raidas. By then, the fame of Raidas's knowledge of truth had spread far and wide. Seeing Raidas's economic condition, the sadhu fell into deep thought and wondered: can a knower of the self truly arise even amidst such poverty?"

"That saint, who had come to meet him, said to Raidas, 'I shall give you the touchstone. With it, your life will improve.'"

"Raidas replied,

'Brother, I have no need of any object. Everything is already full and complete. One who is dissatisfied needs the touchstone. For one who is content, the touchstone is merely a stone.'"

Letting out a long breath, Munilal said-

"Gurudev, everything has become clear. For

tomorrow's programme, no further preparation is needed now. As we are, so we shall present ourselves tomorrow, before time, to take part in the programme."

Hearing Munilal's words, Gopal Babu began to weigh the matter within his mind. The saying was indeed true: without reverence, there can be no love. ❑

New Life

☰

From the programme at Mahadevpur, that is, from the celebration of Raidas Jayanti at Mahadevpur, many forms of new life arose and spread across the area. The village awakened, the village society awakened, and along with Gopal Babu, the lives of Munilal and Dhunilal also rose into a new awareness.

The village awakened in this way: until that day, no birth anniversary of a great man, a self-realised soul, a knower of truth, had ever been celebrated there. Because such a celebration was held, the village received a new life. Moreover, the organiser of the programme announced openly from the stage that, as long as strength remained in his body and he retained the ability to arrange such events, he would continue to organise the celebration.

People naturally gain enthusiasm by seeing others. All those from the neighbouring villages who had come to the programme rose from their seats, from wherever they were sitting in the gathering, stood up one after another and said-

"As long as we live, we shall continue to offer birthday greetings to Raidas Baba in this way."

A new spirit entered the people of society.

Among the speakers, Gopal Babu was the principal speaker. Therefore, he was given time in the third part of the programme, that is, during the third stage of the event. Gopal Babu was not the kind of speaker who wrote his speech upon paper, carried it to the stage and read it aloud. He was the kind of speaker who shaped his thoughts according to his own discipline, and whatever he prepared inwardly, he spoke directly before the people. Therefore, he neither prepared a written speech beforehand in the usual way, nor afterwards kept saying that he had forgotten the most important point.

On the third day after the programme, the sun had begun moving towards setting. Gopal Babu was sitting upon the cot in the veranda by the doorway, waiting for tea. His wife had already peeped out from the courtyard and seen that he had washed his hands and feet, sprinkled water upon his face, eyes, nose and ears, and come to sit down. Seeing her husband seated, Sushila began preparing tea.

Sushila had brought a change into her own thinking. Until then, in society, it had been considered improper for a woman to sit before a man and drink tea or eat anything alongside him. She had corrected that restrictive boundary and made it natural and equal. So, holding one glass of tea for Gopal Babu in one hand and one for herself in the other, she came to the doorway, placed a glass in her husband's hand, shifted her own glass from her left hand to her right, and sat down upon the cot.

During the day, Sushila had heard from many mouths that Gopal Babu had brought honour to the

village. She too had an inner awareness of this. Therefore, she sat before her husband without hesitation, intending not only to drink tea but also to have a conversation with him.

After washing his hands and feet, Gopal Babu had hardly come to the doorway and sat down on the cot when the speech of the day before yesterday returned to his mind. As he reviewed the speech, his attention rested upon certain words. Inwardly, he began to regret that, before the village society among whom the programme had taken place, he had spoken some words that were not quite suited to that audience, and that he ought to have explained them. That he had not been able to do.

The confusion around words is so powerful in our society that even religion, though an undeniable truth, has become so entangled in a net of words that its real form has almost disappeared, leaving only the word in its place. There are seven billion people on earth. Everyone has his own religion and his own action, and from this arise seven billion interpretations of religion. We see that the same Mahavirji is invoked by a thief while stealing, with the promise that if the theft goes well, he will offer sweets. A constable too makes a vow that if there is no theft in his area, he will offer sweets. This is the very game that the people of the world have spread, and nature too has spread it in the same way. The same object is nectar, and it is also death.

During the speech, certain unfamiliar words had slipped from Gopal Babu's mouth in relation to the life of Raidas, such as seeker, knower of truth, thinker of the self, touchstone and so on. He was now inwardly

breaking them down and examining them. Whatever may be the case, whether there is quarrel and conflict or affection and love, between husband and wife there certainly exists such a pull of thought that each regards the other's life as one's own.

After taking two sips of tea, a restless fluttering began to rise in Sushila's mind. She had heard from many mouths the praise of her husband. Sushila said-

"What all happened in Mahadevpur village?"

Hearing his wife's thought, Gopal Babu began to reflect inwardly. A lizard does not click without reason. There must certainly be some cause. Turning the thought over, Gopal Babu said-

"First tell me who said what to you. Only then shall I match it with what actually happened."

A new scene of affection had already appeared before Sushila's mind. It was this: whatever may be, am I not his other half? If today some fruit comes to my husband, or comes to me, then it belongs half to each of us, does it not? If society raises praise in my husband's name, then that praise is mine too. This happiness was dancing in Sushila's mind.

After drinking tea, Gopal Babu was looking at himself within his own mind. To look at oneself is indeed to look at truth. People in society and family look more at others, but they are unable to see themselves, to see what their own movement and conduct are. Whatever exists, wherever it exists, let it remain there. What concern did Gopal Babu have with that? His concern was this: having received a body, the most valuable thing in the world, upon which the whole play of the world takes place, what kind of life was his own?

All at once, a delusion awakened in Gopal Babu's mind. What awakened was this: until now, his own life had been living under an illusion. He had believed that among the body of teachers he too was both a colleague and one who received cooperation. That had been a delusion. Its direct recognition had come at the Raidas Jayanti celebration.

"I am a human being. With every human being in the world, I share an equal relationship. If somewhere in between there exists some flaw or unevenness, then I should first examine what virtues and faults I myself possess. What the world does, how can one discover that among seven billion people? But to understand and know oneself, that knowledge is surely within reach."

His own thoughts seemed to make Gopal Babu whole and balanced. Becoming thus composed, he raised his face towards his wife and said-

"You did not hear the people of society abusing or quarrelling, did you? Society has two mouths. Sometimes it laughs on seeing a good deed, and sometimes it laughs even on seeing a bad deed. And the one who laughs at a bad deed will certainly laugh at a good deed too."

Just as, at an auspicious moment in a family, if some childish boy blurts out something awkward, the family members become irritated, Sushila too grew annoyed and said-

"Let bad things happen in other people's homes. Why should they happen in ours?"

Of course, Sushila had spoken in irritation, but the heart within her was overflowing with happiness. So, after speaking, she smiled.

Gopal Babu too was inwardly measuring what effect the Raidas Jayanti celebration had produced upon society. Raidas was not merely a man of his age; he was also a man of life itself. Among the lives of millions and crores, he too possessed one life. But that life was no ordinary life. It was the life of a seeker, almost divine.

You may say that people today have become more cunning. Yet it would not be true to claim that in those times, in the age of Raidas nearly six hundred years ago, such cunning did not exist. Whether it is a thatched hut, a mud-walled house, or even a masonry building, all are struck by the western winds of Jeth (a Hindu month correspondeng to May) and the gusts of the Hathiya (rainy) constellation. Some part of them may collapse, but after the storm they can be built again. Yet life still needs a house in which to dwell. If there is no understanding in life, then ignorance becomes only natural.

It so happened that Gopal Babu and his wife were still talking when he saw Munilal and Dhunilal coming along the road. Gopal Babu whispered to his wife-

“The sanskar of both boys is very strong.”

Having said this, Gopal Babu closed his mouth and, lifting his gaze from his wife, turned it towards Munilal and Dhunilal. When gaze meets gaze, sometimes the eyes open and sometimes they lower themselves. That did not quite happen here, yet a certain sweetness had certainly entered the water of his eyes.

Meanwhile, from a little distance away, Munilal said-

“Pranam, Gurudev. People are speaking about you from village to village!”

Gopal Babu himself had expected something of the sort. After all, every new act gives rise to discussion. So, changing the direction of the conversation, Gopal Babu said-

"What benefit did the programme of the day before yesterday bring to you both?"

Gopal Babu said this because he believed that only when people begin to understand their own loss and gain, or what is right and wrong, do they start turning away from loss and wrongdoing and move towards gain and righteousness. And only when they begin moving towards what is right by their own understanding will they gradually become better and better, perhaps one day becoming like Raidas himself, the self-realised seeker and knower of truth. The order of conversation is one thing, but how can one deny that there is also an order in practical life?

At this stage, how could boys of the ninth class, still childlike in life, fully understand loss and gain? Yet just as the mind turns green on receiving the blessings of one's parents and thought begins to blossom, so it happened with Munilal. He said-

"Gurudev, many people asked my father, 'Is Munilal your son, Dukhan?'"

The world, after all, is the world, where a two-coloured play continues endlessly. Some people gain brightness through the strength of the father, and some through the strength of the son. Whatever that may be, if these two boys, Munilal and Dhunilal, could now be made to stand not only upon thought but also upon practical life, then as thought blossomed and expanded, their actions too would blossom and expand in the same

way.

Gopal Babu’s mind accepted this. He said-

“Boys, our forefathers used to say that if a man has no firmness, no human courage, no endeavour, no strength of character, then what shall we call him? Of course, we shall call him the broken end of a man, the tail of a man, or merely the swelling on a man’s throat. And what shall we call one who has a man’s face and a voice within that face? Of course, a human being.”

There was vision within Gopal Babu’s thought. Neither Munilal nor Dhunilal understood the first part clearly. But when they heard the second idea, the phrase “the swelling on the neck of society” their minds flashed with sudden understanding. The warmth of inner strength awakened within them. Filled with that warmth, they spoke together in one voice-

“Gurudev, not only has faith awakened in our minds, but even the beating of our hearts accepts that Gurudev Gopal Babu is not merely a teacher who gives lessons but also a giver of life.”

Just as both boys had spoken together in one voice, so too they fell silent together and began murmuring softly-

“I have placed my life, Gurudev, in your hands.”

With a peaceful mind, Gopal Babu said-

“Boys, listen carefully. The world is an act of goodness born of love, but it is also a misdeed born of cruelty and suffering. The world is not only as much as you see with your eyes. And even if there were only one world, that itself would be something, but there are countless worlds.”

In the middle, Munilal said- “Gurudev, I understand only one world.”

Understanding his childlike state, Gopal Babu said-

“As you grow, the world too will continue to grow before you. So nothing will come merely through rushing and fluttering.”

The programme of the day before yesterday had filled Gopal Babu’s mind with joy. Not only his mind, even his life had begun taking steps towards gladness.

In the middle of speaking, Gopal Babu fell silent. The reason for his silence was that a serious principle had awakened in his mind. The thought arose: why not explain to both boys that a double life also exists upon the earth, and that they should understand this doubleness before choosing the path of a single, honest life? But he restrained his own thought. Just as, in the battle of the Mahabharata, Arjun tested the matter by examining Abhimanyu’s head, Gopal Babu too, as though examining the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal, decided that this was not yet the proper time.

Holding back the thought, Gopal Babu said-

“Boys, keep this in mind for our next conversation: how does life change?” ❑

Affection

☰

From the day a difference of opinion arose between Gopal Babu and his companions, every form of affection that had existed earlier among them also received a blow. The feeling of oneness that had remained among the companions until then was touched by distrust. Of course, distrust did arise, but not entirely. Had complete distrust arisen, the relationship itself would have been affected. That did not happen. What happened was only this: in holding to the path of one's own life, a human being has to face many obstacles, from family and society to the country and the world. And how could it be otherwise? Where the question is of taking the thoughts and practices of the past, making them useful in the present environment, and shaping them in accordance with the future, it is no child's play.

After school was dismissed, Gopal Babu walked about ten steps ahead and then began turning back again and again to look, thinking that if Munilal and Dhunilal appeared, they would walk together to his quarters while talking. Even if both boys did not come together and only one of them appeared, that too would

be good.

By chance, the same thought had already arisen in the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal: Gopal Babu would, after all, be going to his quarters. If they could meet him now, they would walk with him and talk on the way. One who searches is truly a searcher. Such a person discovers even a pearl lying in the deep waters of the sea, and even the touchstone hidden among the rocks of a mountain. As one's feeling is, so too does one receive.

Munilal's eyes met Gopal Babu's eyes. Between the two, Gopal Babu was ahead, and Munilal was behind. Holding back his steps, Gopal Babu moved slowly ahead. The one behind, too, needed to lengthen his steps. It was not proper that both should keep walking according to their own separate pace. If they continued like that, how would they come together, and how would a single rhythm of thought be formed?

Before Munilal and Dhunilal reached Gopal Babu, he had already seen them from the corner of his eye. From ahead, he said-

"Boys, how are things?"

While speaking, however, Gopal Babu had pressed down the true feeling of his mind within himself. What he had held back was this: from the day the stream of thought had begun among the teachers, Gopal Babu had also brought a turn into his own life. He had decided that he would reach the school five minutes before half past ten. In that interval, he would refresh himself, from relieving himself to moistening his face and ears with water, and when the bell rang, he would reach the classroom among the children and fulfil his duty. At half

past four, school would be dismissed, and he would return to his quarters. As for the determination of school hours, there were rules and regulations for that too.

Munilal said-

"Your speech was..."

Gopal Babu was becoming so gentle towards Munilal and Dhunilal that he had begun treating them like his own children. After all, when someone raises a voice carrying one's own sorrow, it is not proper even to turn away from it. Reaching near Gopal Babu, Munilal said-

"Gurudev, Vimal Babu was feeling regret. Of course, he will tell you himself, but because of the raised eyes of others, he is holding himself back."

Taking him as one of his own companions, Gopal Babu restrained the thought in his heart and said-

"Is Vimal Babu some divided man that he should feel ashamed to open his mouth and speak?"

Whether because of their own curiosity or because of the movement of time, at half past four, the hour of dismissal, everyone came out, some ahead and some behind. Since Gopal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal were walking while talking, their steps had slowed. In such a situation, even those who come out first fall behind those who walk quickly from the rear. Thus, although Gopal Babu and the two boys had left the school earlier, they gradually fell behind. In this way, Vimal Babu came near them and said-

"What is it, boy Munilal?"

Meanwhile, Vimal Babu's eyes met Gopal Babu's eyes. Seeing Vimal Babu lost beneath a sky of regret,

Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal Babu, in the life of victory and defeat, no one truly loses and no one truly wins. Each person tries to complete the pattern of his own life. If success and failure, bitterness and sweetness, right and wrong do not arise within that, then tell me, what will arise?"

Just as, when treating the pain of a stiffness in the back, the two flames of a split wick placed there flicker and draw together to drive away the pain, so Gopal Babu's thought stirred something within Vimal Babu. Yet in the realm of practical conduct, Vimal Babu had fallen so far behind in relation to his own thoughts that his chest was bound to tremble. Still, a human being is a conscious creature. If he truly wishes to awaken, bind firm resolve with clear awareness, and bring himself into a new life, he can certainly do so.

Of course, Vimal Babu was a teacher of science and Gopal Babu a teacher of literature. Therefore, there existed a distance between them within the society of teachers at the school. There was another reason for that distance as well: a society divided by caste and community. Caste and community too create distance between people. In conversation, people freely use the word distance, yet in practical life they suppress, that is, conceal, the distance that actually exists, and still raise their faces towards one another.

Just as different stations on a mobile phone broadcast their programmes in different languages, is the language of human beings any less varied? As many kinds of people as one exchanges thoughts with, so many kinds of language and so many kinds of thought exist.

This may be said in another way: the concrete form that religion and action ought to have has become abstract in the sound of words. Because of this, human life has become diseased. Whatever exists, wherever it exists, let it remain there. Why should Gopal Babu or Vimal Babu be needlessly concerned with all that? Their concern is only this: they too are part of society, and therefore they too have some right to act. To shape one's life in one's own way and live it with joy, is this not present in everyone's heart? Everyone has also formed his own intention. Here, one should not understand this to mean that fatalism has, from the beginning, been living as a philosophy in our society and continuing to move within it.

Talking as they went, Vimal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal reached Gopal Babu's quarters with him. Like children of the household, Munilal and Dhunilal brought chairs down from the veranda and placed them in the courtyard. Gopal Babu and Vimal Babu sat side by side in one line, close enough to speak almost ear to ear. Meanwhile, Munilal and Dhunilal made arrangements for tea and refreshments.

Munilal arrived carrying refreshments arranged on a tray. In fact, considering the four of them, the refreshments had been served on four plates. Meanwhile, Dhunilal too arrived with water in glasses and a mug. Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, place the four plates in four places. Put the glass and the mug in the middle, and place one glass of water beside each person's plate."

Now, do not imagine plastic glasses here, the kind that overturn while one is eating and jump onto the

body. The water will not merely leap onto the body and disappear; falling from the table arranged with chairs for eating, it will wet everything from the chest down to the feet. After all, when you sit to eat, eat with a steady mind. If you start adding up bank accounts while eating, will you eat, or will your mind wander? If there is no concentration in life, what kind of life is that?

All four began to take refreshments. In the meantime, Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal Babu, what does a person bring into life, and what will he take away?"

Vimal Babu began to card Gopal Babu's thought like Kabir Das's cotton. He was trying to work out whether Gopal Babu had released an arrow of satire or an arrow of action. But finding the question unfathomable, or perhaps finding its answer unfathomable, Vimal Babu stepped back and said-

"Brother Sahib, there is nothing in this world. There is only this much: let us live life with love."

By then, the refreshments were finished, and all four had drunk half a glass of tea each. Everyone's mind had become light and refreshed. Like Ram dwelling within the self, Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal Babu, neither forming love is difficult nor sustaining it is difficult."

Carried along by the flow of thought, or by the flow of feeling, Vimal Babu said in a shaken voice-

"It is not easy either."

Smiling, Gopal Babu said-

"The heavy wedding season was going on. Let me tell you a living story. I was returning from the market.

On the way there was a toddy shop. At the shop were some people from the groom's side, along with five or seven traders dealing in fish and makhana. The man arranging his son's marriage had received a large sum of money, so naturally his mind was swollen with joy. He was offering toddy to everyone at the shop, asking each person in turn to drink at his expense."

"Within half an hour, such a close bond formed between them, that is, between the wedding party and the fish and makhana traders, that a vehicle was hired at once, and eight or ten of them became members of the wedding procession. On one side there was the surge of money, and on the other the heat of toddy. The fish and makhana traders spent more than fifty thousand rupees of their own money on the wedding.

"Now you tell me, was that love worth a lakh of rupees or not?"

For one thing, Vimal Babu's own wounded thoughts had already been disturbed, and after hearing this living example, they were stirred even more. Becoming somewhat unsettled, he said-

"Yes, that was certainly love."

It was not like a singer of bhajans or kirtans who, after finishing one hymn, adjusts the note and tune for the next. Rather, it was like a singer of marsiya (death-song) who, after one elegy ends, immediately joins the next and sings, "One marsiya has ended, the next begins." In the same way, Gopal Babu carried the thought of love further and said-

"Vimal bhai, more difficult than forming love is sustaining the love that has already been formed."

Just as an orchard of apples and grapes may

bewilder a grower of mangoes and jackfruit from Mithilanchal, so Vimal Babu too began to feel bewildered. Seeing Vimal Babu's uncertain expression, Gopal Babu turned towards Munilal and said-

"Munilal, just as it is easy for affection to arise, or for friendship with someone to begin, it is difficult to sustain it."

Neither Munilal nor Dhunilal properly understood Gopal Babu's thought, nor did Vimal Babu fully grasp it. Yet all three certainly raised their ears like deer to listen and kept their mouths closed. In the course of these conversations, Munilal had become open-hearted before Gopal Babu. So, without hesitation, he said-

"Gurudev, I could not understand it properly."

Hearing Munilal's honest reply, Gopal Babu laughed. The reason for his laughter was precisely that honesty. People do not wish to confess their own weakness with their own mouths, even if they must hide behind a thousand lies or place blame upon a thousand others. They keep trying to make falsehood appear as truth.

Gopal Babu balanced his thoughts carefully. Balanced in the sense that, on one side, there stood a high school science teacher, and on the other, ninth-class students Munilal and Dhunilal. If any idea had to be explained, it had to be explained while keeping both in view, so that all could understand it in a similar manner. He said-

"Vimal Babu, when affection arises for someone, keep a clear measure of it. Whatever degree of love has arisen for another person, let there be no decline in it. If it increases, that will certainly give it direction. But even

if it does not increase, one should at least preserve it in such a way that it does not diminish.”

Munilal and Dhunilal thought inwardly that whatever they had not fully understood, they would ask about another day. So they kept silent. Vimal Babu said-

“One firm thought has certainly been received.”

Smiling, Gopal Babu said-

“When love has been formed and no decrease enters it, then there will also be a path for sustaining it, will there not?”

Vimal Babu said-

“This should indeed be like a scientific formula.”

As soon as Vimal Babu spoke, Gopal Babu seized the thought and carried it further,

“Once love has been formed, do not allow dryness or cruelty to enter the thought. In the same way, do not allow love to grow stale. That means: keep movement within the relationship. And when you bring movement into a relationship, you must also remove fear and anxiety from the mind.”

Letting out a long breath, Vimal Babu said-

“The next thought shall remain for another day. I shall go now.” ❑

Human Endeavour

☰

Although the school was open, the attendance of teachers was low that day, and so was the attendance of students. Of course, both Gopal Babu and Vimal Babu knew that it was the last auspicious wedding date of the year. Therefore, just as the teachers were occupied with marriages and wedding ceremonies, the students too were entangled in them. Gopal Babu and Vimal Babu had not been invited to just one place, but to four or five places each. Yet those invitations were for the night. So, just like the teachers, the students too had become busy with the affairs of their own families and relatives and therefore remained absent from school.

Since it was the final wedding date of the season, such an atmosphere had spread from village to village that even the lame and the limping would somehow be married off. In other words, every possible effort would be made to see that no one remained unmarried. From the previous day itself, from the day of the kumaram ritual, the bursting of firecrackers had created constant commotion. Along with that, the sound of DJs and vehicles moving about had changed the atmosphere of every village.

As the school was open, Gopal Babu and Vimal

Babu reached a little before their fixed time, that is, before half past ten. The number of students present was less than half, yet they belonged to all classes. Although the school had nine teachers and three hundred and fifty students, only around a hundred to a hundred and twenty-five students and just two teachers had arrived.

Both teachers sat in the staff room and began considering how teaching could continue with only the two of them. Gopal Babu asked Vimal Babu-

"Vimal Babu, what shall we do? If at least four or five teachers had been here, we could somehow have managed half-periods and combined classes. But what can two people do?"

Just as there is a saying in the village, "A ghost prefers impurity," Vimal Babu said-

"It would be better to give the students a holiday."

Gopal Babu too accepted this inwardly. If the work of teaching could not properly be managed, what other option remained? He gave his consent. Vimal Babu dismissed the students, and the students turned towards their homes.

Only the two of them remained as staff. In his mind, Vimal Babu was already calculating how best to use the time. It was good that there was now a holiday; he would be able to attend to his market errands. On Sundays, just as the school remained closed, the market too remained shut. Therefore, market work could not be done on a holiday. Today, however, the opportunity had conveniently fallen into his hands. Both purposes would be fulfilled together: his attendance at school had been marked, and his market work too would now be

completed.

After dismissing the students, Vimal Babu said to Gopal Babu-

“Master Sahib, instead of the two of us sitting here like ghosts and talking, it would be better if we both left as well.”

Hearing Vimal Babu’s thought, Gopal Babu smiled softly, but he did not allow a single word to escape his mouth. Seeing Gopal Babu’s smile, Vimal Babu’s mind began to sink into unfathomable waters. No clear thought arose within him. Silently, his own mind began rebuking itself: a man of such serious thought as Gopal Babu is smiling. A lizard does not click without reason.

However much Vimal Babu tried inwardly, he could not grasp the meaning of Gopal Babu’s smile. And how could he? Had he encountered ethics and sociology deeply, perhaps he might have understood it. But in his life so far, he had never received that opportunity. The only opportunity he had received was to study physics and chemistry.

Even there, our society has become so crooked and confused that, as long as a child remains in childhood and student life without earning, his parents drain their bones to spend whatever they can upon his education. Yet after he grows up and begins to earn, does he truly continue to cultivate himself? One may say that he no longer gets time to read and study, so why speak unnecessarily? Very well. Whether we accept your thought or not, will the person to whom we speak it necessarily accept it? He will, after all, walk according to his own mind. Very well, let him walk. But if the poison of a dog bite rises to his head, will someone else remove

it for him?

Had Vimal Babu encountered ethics and the discipline of spiritual practice, then perhaps he would also have encountered his own inner wealth and his own true action. But will someone else show him that, or must he search for it himself and bring it before his own eyes?

Gopal Babu said-

“Vimal Babu, in this world, no one is anyone’s master and no one is anyone’s slave. Everyone is his own master, and everyone is also his own slave.”

Vimal Babu was startled, as though he had suddenly encountered a new thought. Being a science teacher, he had at least accepted inwardly that the superstition and orthodoxy present in our society could one day be uprooted completely through science alone. We see that whether it is snake venom or the poison of a dog bite, what was once treated through charms and incantations is now treated medically. Yet until now, it had never occurred to Vimal Babu that in a place where even an iron engine is worshipped with vermilion, rice paste, flowers and leaves, people would naturally feel that they were no longer worshipping a Mahadev made of sand, but an iron Mahadev instead.

Thinking and reflecting with a degree of unease, Vimal Babu discovered a line marking the boundary of life. The line he discovered was this: until five days earlier, the relationship he had shared with Gopal Babu had been of one kind, but now some movement had certainly entered it. From that movement, he himself had gained at least this much understanding: after expressing his own weakness and limitation before

Gopal Babu, such affection had arisen between them that his own mind accepted that the kind of endeavour Gopal Babu possessed existed in no one else in the school. In other words, among all the teachers there, no one possessed dedication like his.

And how would they have it? High school teachers may be of one level. They may work in the same school. Not only that, they may all sit in the same room. Yet such a thought never arises in their minds: in a school of one level, what is the level of the teaching that takes place? Whether it is literature or commerce, are the levels of literature and commerce the same, or are they different? From a social point of view, whether it is physics or chemistry, should not every subject in a school of one level also have one standard?

Gopal Babu and Vimal Babu stood in the realm of thought like the two armies on the battlefield of the Mahabharata in the Dwapar age: the Kaurava army on one side and the Pandava army on the other, eyes fixed upon eyes. In the same way, their eyes were set upon each other in the field of thought.

Placing himself in the position of a younger brother, Vimal Babu said-

"Brother Sahib, about your smile...?"

Vimal Babu had spoken only halfway when, in the meantime, Gopal Babu said-

"Curiosity is good, but even goodness has its limits, does it not? In a life of one level, everything should also be of one level."

Gopal Babu spoke according to his own measure, that is, according to the measure of thought, and Vimal Babu understood it according to his own measure. Yet

one confusion arose in him: thought too has its own level, and whoever crosses his own boundary becomes unfit. Vimal Babu said-

"Brother Sahib, what was the reason for your smiling laughter?"

A worthy answerer makes himself worthy before the question of a worthy questioner. Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal Babu, in terms of work, both of us are incapable today. Yet this much is certainly true: even if teaching is not taking place, our presence in the school will still be counted, will it not?"

In the flow of thought, Vimal Babu said-

"Yes, that will be counted."

"Along with our right, should we not also look at our duty? When no one is our master, then no one is our..."

Vimal Babu said-

"Yes, that is true."

Then Gopal Babu said-

"From half past ten to half past four, are we not taking wages for our labour? In that case, if we play tricks with time, should such a thing befit a teacher?"

It was as though one delusion of life broke within Vimal Babu. In the same way, the level of his own thought also rose. From this, the sprout of impartial thought began to be born in his mind. Vimal Babu said-

"No, that should not happen."

By chance, after dismissal, Munilal and Dhunilal arrived. Just as Krishna, holding the reins of Arjun's horses by the bit, drew them back, Gopal Babu held the

reins of courtesy and drew back the thought within his own mind. As soon as it was restrained, his mind found peace. He said-

"It is good that both children have come. Now we are four. When four thoughts come from four directions, one social thought surely takes shape."

The thinking of Munilal and Dhunilal had indeed improved. Whenever they came near someone refined, they first looked at the arrangement for sitting. Whatever other thoughts might have arisen in their minds, this one thought had certainly arisen: what the gathering had once been like, and what it had now become.

Making his thought balanced and clear, Gopal Babu said-

"Boys, open your ears and listen carefully. All of us have become one. And when we have become one, should there not also be work born from a shared thought?"

Dhunilal said-

"Yes, that certainly should be."

Gopal Babu said-

"What kind of work should arise from one shared thought?"

Just as the minds of Munilal and Dhunilal became entangled and turned inward, something similar began to happen to Vimal Babu as well. Yet he showed this much restraint: he kept his thoughts within his own mind.

Seeing his own sense of courtesy, Gopal Babu's mind told him that, among students, it is proper for a

teacher to ask questions in a disciplined manner. But here there was neither any need nor any compulsion. So there was no point in speaking unnecessarily. It would be better to reflect upon whether the action of the previous day had been a good deed or a bad one, to grasp the spirit of the good deed from the roots of the past, and to bring it into the present. The future, after all, is only the tomorrow yet to arrive.

Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal bhai, the highest creation within creation is the human being, and the human being exists in two forms, that is, in two sexes. We belong to the male class, in the form of men."

Just as Munilal and Dhunilal were turning the thought over in their minds, so too was Vimal Babu. It was not that he failed to grasp it. Vimal Babu understood it well enough and, in the middle, said-

"From purush, man, comes purusharth, human endeavour."

A principle of linguistics awakened in Gopal Babu's mind. Seeing the joining of words, his own mind encouraged him. After all, a marriage arranged after seeing and understanding both bride and groom may be called one based upon knowledge and consent. But if that has not happened, or has happened differently, is it proper to cast someone out of the village?

Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal bhai, you are a teacher of science. You understand the movement of the world."

Accepting this, Vimal Babu said- "Yes, that is certainly so."

Just as a fisherman lovingly selects the fish that has come into his net and accepts it as his own, Gopal Babu, taking Vimal Babu as one of his own, said to him-

"Vimal Babu, only by remaining firm in one's resolve, and by dedicating oneself to the making of a steadfast life, can one truly build one's life."

Just as a vessel placed upon the stove certainly becomes blackened, yet begins to shine again when scrubbed with cleansing earth, so too a glow arose in Vimal Babu's mind and heart. He did indeed shine inwardly, but no words emerged from his mouth.

All four of them, Gopal Babu, Vimal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal, continued looking at one another's faces. No one spoke. But just as it becomes difficult to stop the current of a flood, a wave of feeling rose within Gopal Babu. He said-

"Vimal bhai, the soul can become the Supreme Soul. The first thinker who gave this principle discovered a very great truth. So shall this quality of his not be regarded as a quality of true human endeavour?"

Agreeing, Vimal Babu said-

"Yes, it certainly should be regarded so."

Seeing the current of intellectual hunger awakening within Vimal Babu, Gopal Babu said-

"And in the same way, a false vision, that is, a mistaken understanding, can also be transformed into right vision, can it not?"

Accepting this, Vimal Babu said-

"Yes, it can certainly be transformed."

Gopal Babu moved further and said-

"One who has no resolve of his own, who is

unsupported and helpless, can also become resolute and build his own life, can he not?”

Vimal Babu removed his eyes from Gopal Babu’s and turned them towards Munilal. From Munilal’s face, it appeared that he was completely absorbed in the discussion. Vimal Babu said-

“Yes, he can certainly build it.”

Joy too has its own limits. Standing at the edge of his own feeling, Gopal Babu said-

“Vimal bhai, how the negligent can become vigilant, and how the attached can become detached, let that remain for another day. What do you say, Dhunilal?”❑

The Mind Hung Suspended

☰

From the time Vimal Babu returned from Gopal Babu's place yesterday, his mind seemed to hang suspended upon the horizon, on the boundary between earth and sky. Unlike on other days, at dinner he found neither the familiar sour taste of mango pickle in the boiled arhar dal, nor any relish in the ghee-smeared rotis, nor in the sajmani (gourd) vegetable cooked with groundnuts, nor in the grape chutney. When the mind is uprooted, everything appears uprooted. Perhaps the same thing had happened to Vimal Babu.

Nor was that all. After eating, when Vimal Babu came to his bed, sleep did not arrive quickly as it did on other days, the moment he lay down. It would not be right to say that sleep did not come at all. It did come, but only after midnight. Even then, another disturbance came and stood in the way. Just as a child with an upset stomach asks for water again and again and also urinates again and again, he too began to feel the urge to pass urine every now and then. As we know, some sentries may allow a little delay, but urine and stool, like a Nepali sentry, permit no delay at all. In the course of

the night, Vimal Babu got up and urinated half a dozen times. His wife too asked him once why he was so restless, but what Vimal Babu said in reply belongs to the talk of the household.

After rising from bed, Vimal Babu's mind was not dazed as on other days. It was clear and fresh. Like a man of resolve, Vimal Babu cast his eyes over his daily routine. His gaze went and fixed itself upon that point in the latrine room where he would unnecessarily smoke cigarettes, let his mind wander to Delhi and Bombay, and forget the very work for which he had gone there. Since his mind was already filled with enthusiasm, fresh energy began to take root like the tips of new leaves and branches in a creeper. He began to think that until every action of life was bound within the limits of time, life would remain scattered and spread about, just like old boxes and baskets lying untidily in a house.

Vimal Babu planted in his mind the thought of leaving his quarters at the appointed time. Since his life was still inexperienced in this new discipline, there was naturally some variation in the method and timing of his actions. Yet he did not pay attention to that, because during the night some questions of thought had awakened within him. How were they to be resolved, both in thought and in practice? His mind came and hung fast at that very point. It trembled. And why would it not tremble? With his own eyes he saw that one person becomes learned by licking books day and night, while another becomes learned even in dreams, and yet another becomes learned through blessings.

All at once, Vimal Babu's mind began to waver. Still, steadying it, he set out to meet Gopal Babu.

Among us it is also said- “A hurried wedding leaves vermilion on the temple.” The same happened to Vimal Babu. What was his daily work? Being a high school teacher, if he began preparing for school from nine o’clock, only then could he reach class on time. But he had paid no attention to what day it was. Conversation has no beginning and no end. Marx too has said that people here are great talkers.

The moment Vimal Babu placed his foot upon the village road, a thought arose in him of its own accord: like the formulae of physics and chemistry, he had merely memorised the formula of life, that he would go to school for six days and not go on the seventh. Immediately his mind turned back. And why would it not turn back? Today was Thursday. If he went to Gopal Babu’s place, it would be a loss for him, and it would be a loss for Gopal Babu too. Because of him, would Gopal Babu not also suffer loss? Better, then, that after school closed, he should join him on the way back. The night was in his own hands. No one had taken the day away from him. Yet out of twenty-four hours, twelve hours of night, that is, half of life, were certainly in his own hands.

As soon as he came onto the village road, Vimal Babu seemed to begin forgetting his own life. We see that everyone wants to make himself free. But among us, the Vedic ordinance itself says that one is free to act: if one does wrong, one will go to hell; if one does good, one will go to heaven. Why, then, should I take blame upon myself? Turning back from the road, Vimal Babu returned and sat on the chair in the veranda by his doorway. He began thinking inwardly about what he had to do that day. Half of his mind was also accepting that, when what one does becomes one’s own, then

knowingly why should one not do what is good for oneself? Why let a bad tendency whirl one round and round in its own circle?

Just as, while asleep, a person forgets the world and wanders in the realm of sleep, so even while awake the mind continues to wander. Suddenly Vimal Babu's mind reached that boundary where he saw himself as he was. Whether one is a student or a teacher of science, a dark stain like the mark on the moon remains attached. That stain is this: the belief is widespread in society that those who study science are opposed to religion.

He too was a member of his own circle of companions. Therefore, Vimal Babu's own mind accepted this. And why would it not? From the day he had enrolled in the eighth class of high school, he had studied science as a student up to BSc. After completing his BSc, he had become a science teacher in the high school. Whether others accepted it or not, even if people called him a shallow teacher, he was, after all, teaching in the school.

Who would remove such a belief that had formed within society? It was a stain upon the enlightened class of society itself. And what could be done by that section which had never even seen the face of a school or college? The more Vimal Babu wished to run in the realm of thought, the more he became entangled in his own slough, like a snake caught in its shed skin. Since it was a panchayat of two thoughts, how could anything be said without understanding both sides? If one side was somewhat sound, the other was utterly hollow. In other words, Vimal Babu had indeed studied physics and chemistry from class eight up to BSc, but he had only

heard of religion and spirituality. How they arise and how they move, he did not really understand any of these matters.

Of course, another belief also exists in society: one should not reveal the true thought of one's mind to another, that is, one should not ask openly about such matters. But for now, leave aside what is true and what is false. Suddenly, Vimal Babu's own willpower awakened. As soon as that willpower arose, his mind gave him a thought: he must not behave in the careless manner people describe when they say, "The farming done by boys and calves, if nothing grows, what does it matter?" He would have to act only after thinking things through properly.

All at once, Vimal Babu's own thoughts struck him: why does anyone in this world make another person a well-wisher or an opponent, a friend or an enemy, a brother or a kinsman? Is it not so that all may live together? In that case, if one hides the thoughts of one's mind within oneself and does not allow another person to understand them, then what remains except God and the Master?

Suddenly, Vimal Babu's judgement bent inward, opened like an eye, and gave him a kind of vision. He decided that, after school, when he met Gopal Babu, this would be the very first question he would ask him: what are science and religion, and why are they regarded as opposed to one another?

After nine o'clock, Vimal Babu would usually begin preparing for school. Was this still the age when one could throw a towel or shawl over the body, count that alone as proper clothing, and move everywhere in life

with it, from the royal court to the fields? Modern life, after all, had become burdened with many requirements. Even the shoe-polisher had become expensive. Since polishing shoes now cost more, Vimal Babu polished his own shoes. In the same way, he ironed his own clothes. And when he ironed them himself, would someone else wash them, or would he not have to wash them too? Whatever the case, within an hour's effort Vimal Babu finished all such tasks.

When a new thought enters the mind, or when a new word is learnt, the mind keeps holding onto it constantly, lest it slip away and be forgotten. Something similar was happening within Vimal Babu's mind as well. Whatever else may have been happening, he at least preserved this much honesty: just as he drew his salary month after month, so too he fulfilled his teaching duties period after period.

Of course, Vimal Babu took his classes sincerely. But what did sincerity mean here? He had developed such a habit of teaching that the lesson seemed to rest upon his tongue. It was like the Hanuman Chalisa or the story of Lord Satyanarayan: whether his own ears consciously listened or not, he could recite it fluently and continuously. Where, then, was there any room for dishonesty in that?

After reaching a certain point, Vimal Babu's own mind awakened and said to him: I have not truly studied the Hanuman Chalisa or the story of Lord Satyanarayan myself. They were memorised simply by hearing them repeatedly in village society. But who was Hanuman? What kind of being was he? Why does his Chalisa continue to be recited? When had my eyes ever truly

turned towards such questions?

As soon as the half past four bell rang, Vimal Babu's mind became refreshed. You may say that after performing duty everyone feels tired, so how did Vimal Babu's mind remain fresh? Your thought cannot be dismissed, but this too must be considered: tiredness is of two kinds, of the body and of the mind. Bodily tiredness descends and settles at the very point where, on seeing some hanging fruit, the mind itself becomes suspended. That was what happened to Vimal Babu. His mind had become so caught between religion and science, between their distance and their nearness, that it resembled a burr stuck in a tuft of hair. If loosened from one side, it caught hold from the other.

When Vimal Babu moved his feet to go along with Gopal Babu, a thought arose in his mind that it would be good to take Munilal and Dhunilal along as well. Good in this sense: the more a true thought is brought into the open, the greater the welfare it creates. It is only in the mind of one who acts wrongly that even the trust of his wife becomes frightening, for who knows when she may reveal the secret and bring disgrace?

Since it was the same school and the same hour, that is, the time of entering and leaving the school was common to all, meeting one another was naturally easy. This much improvement had indeed taken place in Vimal Babu: the way he had looked at Munilal and Dhunilal until yesterday had changed. The change was this: instead of seeing them merely as school students, he had begun to regard them as younger brothers of the family.

As soon as the four of them came together, they all

began walking towards Gopal Babu's quarters. Of course, the moment Vimal Babu met Gopal Babu face to face, his mind became eager to ask the question that had been troubling him. But seeing students and teachers around them, before and behind, he restrained himself. They continued walking while speaking of village and household matters, yet Vimal Babu's mind remained suspended upon his own question.

On reaching the quarters, Munilal and Dhunilal arranged the seating and seated both Gopal Babu and Vimal Babu. Then the two boys began preparing refreshments and tea. What arrangement was there really to make? Everything was already available. It merely had to be used properly.

After they had taken refreshments and tea, Vimal Babu asked Gopal Babu-

"Brother Sahib, why is it that in society people regard those who study science as opposed to religion?"

Hearing Vimal Babu's question, Gopal Babu began weighing the answer within his mind. It seemed to him that the present discussion would descend even deeper than the settled layer at the bottom of water. How, then, would Vimal Babu's mind become light? The lighter the body, the mind and one's worldly burdens remain, the better it is.

Estimating that the meeting would last about an hour, Gopal Babu said-

"What we call knowledge is knowing."

Agreeing, Vimal Babu said-

"Yes, that is certainly so."

Gopal Babu continued- "And what we understand

as Aachaar (conduct), not Acharya, it means doing, that is, action."

Inwardly, Vimal Babu cut and shaped both his own thought and Gopal Babu's thought, arranging them layer upon layer within his mind, and said-

"Knowing and doing, then, are thought and conduct."

Nodding his head, Gopal Babu said-

"Yes. And when knowledge and conduct, that is, thought and conduct, become deep and firm, they begin to emerge naturally as action."

Of course, while speaking, Gopal Babu continued flowing with the thought, but afterwards he felt inwardly that the discussion had begun moving in another direction. It was fortunate that, in the meantime, Vimal Babu repeated-

"Brother Sahib, the question of religion and science has been left behind."

Realising this, Gopal Babu said-

"There was no awareness of where time had gone. For now, understand only this much: just as science is truth, religion too is truth. The deeper discussion will come later." ❑

Destiny and Endeavour

☰

It was the time after sunset. Darkness had not yet spread fully, but the early period of the night had certainly begun. Since it was Sunday, Gopal Babu had finished the work of the day and was sitting upon the cot in the veranda by the doorway, drinking tea. He was entirely at ease. Had his wife needed any household item, she would have come running to him again and again, pressing her various needs upon him. But there was no such need. So she too sat in the veranda of the courtyard, drinking tea and thinking to herself: first she would wash and bring all the things needed for making tea, the kettle, cups and strainer. Then she would arrange the tea ingredients, the tea leaves, sugar and so on. After that, she would bring the glasses from the doorway, wash them as well, and keep them ready.

Meanwhile, her own thought changed at once. In other words, this arose in Sushila's mind: it would be better to complete one fixed task at one fixed time. If things were done in a scattered order, then the doer's thoughts too would become like the minds of those who keep changing sides. Here, one should not assume that there can never be a difference between a decision in thought and a decision in action. Such differences do

indeed arise.

Bringing the glasses from the doorway, Sushila arranged her things in such a way that, when the next round of work came, she would not have to search for anything.

After drinking tea and chewing betel, Gopal Babu began looking towards the world before him, that is, towards the open front. Suddenly, like a ripe mango falling heavily from a tree, a thought dropped into his mind. The thought was this: just as Munilal and Dhunilal were like sons to him, so Vimal Babu too was like a younger brother. Was this not, in its own way, a family? Therefore, to acquaint all of them with the philosophy of family life was not only useful, but necessary and unavoidable. Standing at the boundary of this thought, Gopal Babu made a decision within himself that whenever all three met him together, this would be the first subject he would raise.

Once Gopal Babu's mind accepted this, another thought arose within him: what if, by chance, he forgot it? What would he do then? He did not possess the habit common among college teachers of studying at home in preparation for teaching students. He was a teacher of literature. He taught by looking into the book. Unlike teachers of certain other subjects, he did not teach entirely from memory.

Again the question arose in his mind: how, then, would he remember? That is, how would he hold onto the thought of life-philosophy which he wished to discuss with all three of them?

Gopal Babu turned back into memory, and his grandmother came to mind. Whenever she wished to

remember something, she would tie a knot in the end of her sari. But in the entanglement of work she herself would become so entangled that even the knot would slip from her attention, and she would forget. Thus, in the middle of work, the work itself would remain lost.

Kabir Das too has said- “Khet me bedhi diye, bedhahi kha gaye khet, Teen lok me acharaj bhaya, kahe Kabir koi dekh.”

(A fence was placed around the field, but the fence itself ate the field. The three worlds were filled with wonder, Kabir says- Has anyone seen such a thing?)

Gopal Babu’s mind grew restless. And why would it not? The thought he wished to share with Vimal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal, if that very thought were forgotten, how would the desire of his mind ever be fulfilled?

Meanwhile, Gopal Babu’s own mind told him that until he met all three of them, he should keep repeating the thought inwardly from time to time. A period of three hours is itself a unit of time, what we call a watch. If he continued reciting it within his mind, then surely he would remember it. His mind accepted that this would be best.

As Gopal Babu sat there inwardly repeating the thought of life-philosophy, a current of reflection arose within him. In that current of thought, he began running from one boundary to another. Such a current too has its own nature: it gradually calms the mind until the eyes begin to grow heavy, and with that heaviness comes drowsiness.

By chance, all three of them, Vimal Babu, Munilal and Dhunilal, arrived together at Gopal Babu’s place.

Seeing all three together, Gopal Babu felt that he should place his thought before them even before tea and refreshments. But immediately his own mind stopped him and said that this would amount to speaking in haste. A thought gains weight only when it is made suitable to the atmosphere in which it is spoken.

Of course, within himself Gopal Babu remained restless, eager to plant his thought as quickly as possible in the minds of all three. Thus his mind kept rising and falling in the waves of its own reflections.

In the meantime, tea was served. That is, everyone had taken tea. Seeing the proper moment, Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal bhai, in our tradition, two streams of life-philosophy have been flowing from the very beginning."

Of course, in the course of speaking, Gopal Babu had spoken naturally, but when his own mind turned back and reflected, he felt that for Vimal Babu the thought was a balanced bundle, whereas for Munilal and Dhunilal it had become a heavy load. His mind suggested to him that before taking up the main idea, it would be better first to create an emotional ground in the minds of the two boys, so that the thought might take root more firmly.

Gopal Babu was still thinking this within himself when, in the meantime, Vimal Babu asked-

"Have both views of life-philosophy always moved together?"

Gopal Babu said-

"Yes."

Though Munilal and Dhunilal were sitting there

between them, they understood nothing of the foundation of the discussion taking place between Gopal Babu and Vimal Babu. So they sharpened their eyes and ears and became fully attentive.

Gopal Babu understood this, and a thought arose within him: when the matter is explained in detail, they will certainly understand at least some part of it, even though they are still childlike.

Meanwhile, Vimal Babu said to Gopal Babu-

"Brother Sahib, even after passing through so many years of life, I too remain in the same condition regarding life-philosophy as childlike Munilal and Dhunilal."

Gopal Babu began to consider Vimal Babu's thought carefully. After reflecting upon it, another thought arose within him: if he explained things by drawing them close to lived experience, all three would certainly understand something or other. Once a thought entered their minds, they themselves would continue turning it over and asking questions. Then he could refine those questions and bring them to stand upon the ground of truth.

This thought of his own mind calmed Gopal Babu's heart. Once the mind became calm, another idea arose within him: it would be better to express the matter not in a purely explanatory way, but in a mathematical form.

Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal Babu, you are a teacher of science, so you will easily understand a mathematical style. As for Munilal and Dhunilal, even if they understand a little, that too will be very good. We two will already become one and two. And once there are two of us, what to say

of Munilal and Dhunilal? We may also be able to explain it to two more people and increase the number further."

Until trust becomes firmly established between one person and another, thought remains of one kind. Once trust is established, thought changes according to its own nature. Life too is changeable. At times it changes under compulsion, and at times by choice.

Vimal Babu said-

"Brother Sahib, explain it in whatever way seems convenient to you. You know that along with arithmetic, I have also studied and taught geometry."

Gopal Babu understood the gentle affection hidden within Vimal Babu's words and said-

"First understand destiny and endeavour."

On hearing the new words, Vimal Babu raised both ears in alertness.

Seeing Vimal Babu become attentive, Gopal Babu continued-

"The individual and society are two. Yet it is the individual who creates society. Therefore, though the two are different, they are also one. In the same way, the two currents of endeavour and fatalism have been flowing powerfully through society from the very beginning."

Hearing Gopal Babu's thought, Vimal Babu removed the spectacles from his eyes, drew a handkerchief from his pocket, wiped his eyes, cleaned his spectacles, put them back on, and fixed his gaze upon Gopal Babu just as a person, standing at the boundary of his own self, examines his own personality and actions.

Vimal Babu said-

"I have understood endeavour and fatalism. What about you, Munilal? Have you both understood?"

Munilal said-

"Sir, first you understand it properly. When one true guru is found, not only one life but seven lives are redeemed. Here there are two of you. Why, then, should there be any despair in the mind?"

Gopal Babu said-

"Both these doctrines, endeavour and fatalism, have not remained merely matters of intellectual support. They have also continued flowing through the current of life."

Hearing Gopal Babu's thought, Vimal Babu began to turn it over and knead it within his mind. Seeing this inner churning in Vimal Babu's mind, Gopal Babu said-

"Vimal bhai, let us pause here with endeavour and fatalism, and look carefully at the form and outline of the individual and society."

Vimal Babu's mind grew alert again and again as new words appeared before it in fresh forms. And why would it not? Just as cows and buffaloes give milk at both times, in the evening and in the morning, so thought too has both sides: darkness and light. Vimal Babu said-

"Brother Sahib, I feel not the slightest shame in speaking before you. I mean, there is no hesitation in telling you the truth of my life. Just as Munilal and Dhunilal are inexperienced in life, so am I. So how will the inexperienced become experienced? That rests with you."

Seeing Vimal Babu's thought and the expression

on his face, Gopal Babu's mind was moved with concern. He said-

"Vimal bhai, first I shall reveal one form of society."

Hearing the words form of society, Vimal Babu's own mind told him that although he lived in society and called himself social, he had not really known society properly. But whenever one awakens, that very moment is morning. Vimal Babu said-

"As you think proper."

Gopal Babu said-

"First, I shall say what influences sanskar and thought. The greater part of society, that is, the majority of people, is diseased either by ego-feeling or by inferiority-feeling."

Vimal Babu half understood Gopal Babu's thought, and half did not. Yet his mind told him that, instead of interrupting midway, it would be better first to hear everything in one stretch. Afterwards, whatever he had not understood, he would ask again. If there was time today, that would be very good. If there was no time, he would ask another day. Thinking this, Vimal Babu made his eyes and ears alert. By making his eyes and ears alert, one should not understand that life force itself had entered his body.

Seeing Vimal Babu's expression, Gopal Babu understood that he was eager to hear further. He said-

"Vimal Babu, in the Vedic age itself, both endeavour and fatalism were born. Just as many Vedic rishis were advocates of endeavour, many rishis were also fatalists."

The words slipped naturally from Vimal Babu's

mouth- “Then the roots of both must run very deep!”

Gopal Babu said-

“Yes. Let us move further. In the early medieval age came Buddhadev and Mahavir, who were not only thinkers of endeavour but also practitioners of it. They grasped the root of life and set forth their thought. On the other side, in the same period, Goshalak, the Acharya of the Ajivika sect, became a fatalist.”

Without thinking, Vimal Babu spoke in the middle-

“Then history too has confused people!”

Seeing Vimal Babu drifting away from the central point, Gopal Babu drew the thought back and said-

“It has not merely confused them. Even now, people have not properly distinguished between history and Purana. In between, there are psychologists as well.”

Hearing the word psychologist, Vimal Babu said-

“Freud too was a psychologist, was he not?”

Gopal Babu replied-

“Yes, he was. About him, the Russian psychologist Maslow wrote that fatalistic thinkers such as Freud and Darwin spread misleading notions in society and prevented society from moving forward.”

Vimal Babu decided within himself that it would not be wise to become unnecessarily entangled among psychologists. After all, one must examine the philosophy of one’s own life for oneself. He said-

“How is one to form the philosophy of one’s own life?”

Seeing the force of Vimal Babu’s thought, a force

which in scientific language may also be called energy, the electricity of the body, Gopal Babu said-

"Yes, only through life-philosophy can one truly obtain life. But for that, it is first necessary to look within oneself. The soul can also become the Supreme Soul. The first thinker who gave this principle revealed a very great truth upon the earth. That is the first declaration of endeavour."

Vimal Babu said- half aloud- "What declaration?"

Gopal Babu said- "Even today, the majority of people in society continue looking towards the line of their fate. Whatever is written in destiny will certainly happen. Yet while speaking, they also claim that they are people of the twenty-first century."

Vimal Babu asked- "How does one become a person of the twenty-first century?"

Hearing Vimal Babu's thought, Gopal Babu's mind began laughing inwardly. Vimal Babu still regarded life somewhat as a joke. He said-

"Vimal Babu, the more awareness of strength, discernment, resolve and willpower develops within a person, the further he will move ahead. And in the one where these qualities are less developed, he will continue to fall behind to that extent."

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